

AN ASHER BENSON NOVEL

# ASHER



JASON BRANT



Ash

Asher Benson, Volume 1

Jason Brant

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## GET THE DARK FREE



Christy Barnett is sleeping when her aging German shepherd Molly growls into the darkness outside her bedroom. She wakes to a dim glow provided by her Kindle's screen, thankful that she had fallen asleep while reading again. The power has gone out, the world outside her window is eerily dark and silent. And Molly is wary of something that waits in the hallway, hiding in the shadows.

A dark cloud has fallen over the city of Aberdeen, MD. The population disappears in an instant. For the handful of survivors, those lucky enough to have a light source not connected to the power grid, it's more than terrifying. They're left alone, walking through a nightmare, and that is a fate that could be worse than death itself.

*The darkness is alive and it is the reason we fear the night.*

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# 1 - The Sandbox

I couldn't get the blood off my hands.

My fingers shook as adrenaline dumped from my system. I'd done my best to keep my men from seeing my reaction to the ambush, but now that we were back in the Hummer, I finally let it out.

A little.

The tower of gear between my driver, Specialist Brady, and me kept him from seeing the dance my hands were doing. He was too busy honking the horn and ramming cars off the road to notice anyway.

I clenched my jaw, forcing my lips not to quake. Without my Oakleys, it was hard to keep him from seeing the sheen covering my eyes. The stink of copper wafted from my shoulder, where the blood had soaked through. It was sticky and warm.

"Drive on the sidewalk if you have to," I barked at Brady. I hoped my voice didn't quiver.

Sandford and Barker didn't make a sound in the backseat.

We'd followed the orders that came down from the commander, even though we all had a bad feeling about that goddamn house. The front of the place was wide open, giving anyone who wanted to take a shot at us a perfect opportunity. It felt wrong.

The heat baked off the hardened, cracked ground in waves, as it always did in Shitsville, Iraq. Goats bayed somewhere down the street. Sweat coursed from every pore in my body.

Another fireteam joined in, making us eight strong—more than enough to check out one house. We left the Humvees down the block and ran around two shitty apartment buildings on our way to the rear of the house.

Kicked the door in.

Secured the rooms.

No problem.

Except the damn place was empty. Another wild goose chase courtesy of some intel jackass who had never left the green zone. We found a couple of cell



phones and a wad of cash, which meant there could have been some activity there at some point.

Al-Qaeda used cells to detonate IEDs.

Even though I didn't like its wide-open nature, I figured the house wouldn't have much going on since they only sent eight of us. If something big was going down, they usually sent a lot more than that. But still, what the hell was the point? Another day, another example of bureaucratic incompetence.

I sent the other fireteam back to the base while we bagged and tagged the little bit of contraband we found. It didn't take eight guys to round up some cash.

Money had a way of disappearing as it passed through more hands too. It would be easier for me to keep track of it if there were less people involved.

Sergeant Barker kicked a hole in the wall on our way out. He was just a kid really, but this was already his third tour in the sandbox. To say that he'd become disillusioned with the whole thing would be a bit of an understatement.

Barker was a good soldier though. He did what I asked of him, always. Even though I was his lieutenant, we'd developed a bit of a friendship. He liked football, beer, and hot women, which made us blood brothers.

Along with the rest of America, right?

His little boy sent him an email every single day, which always perked him up in the mornings as he read them. Though the kid was five years old, Barker had only spent two of those at home. The other three had been here in Hell. That was no way for a family to function. A son should know his father.

Watching Barker catch a bullet was something that would always haunt me.

He was stomping through the front door, bitching the entire way, when he stumbled. I thought he'd tripped over something at first. The snap of a sniper's rifle reached us a split-second later.

Barker staggered a half step sideways before collapsing in the dirt.

"Get down!" I lunged for the wall beside the door, barely getting out of the way as a bullet whizzed by.

Brady crouched by a window, his mouth twisted in fear. "Is Barker hit?"

"Yeah." I poked my head around the frame, scanning the opposite side of the street for a microsecond. Wood splintered in front of my face as I jerked my head back inside. "I can't spot the fucker."

I looked back at Private Sandford. "Take Brady's spot."

He ran to the window and ducked down. Brady crawled to the corner and stood up as another barrage of rounds peppered the wall by the window.

"What are we going to do?" he asked. I heard the panic in his voice. I couldn't blame him—I was about to shit myself. "We can't leave Barker out there. He's dying, man!"

“Go get the Hummer,” I shouted over the gunfire. “We’ll meet you out back. Don’t stop for anything, you hear me?”

He hesitated. “What about Barker?”

“I’ll get him, now go! And get on the radio. We need some fucking help!”

He ran through the living room, clearing the back door as a series of holes were punched in the floor behind him.

“Sandford, on the count of three, I want you to pop up and put a mag into the building across the street. I’m going to drag Barker in here, you got it?”

“Yes, sir!” He adjusted his grip on his rifle, his eyes as wide as saucers.

I took a deep breath. Sandford hadn’t even turned twenty. I was about to jump into the line of fire with a kid who couldn’t even legally drink yet as my only cover. This was his first tour. Hell, he’d only been out on a handful of missions.

He hadn’t even seen any action until now.

“Barker, can you hear me?” I peeked around the corner again.

Barker was facedown in the dirt. He didn’t move when I called his name a second time.

I held my hand up, one finger raised. Sandford nodded.

Raised a second finger.

With the M4 against my shoulder, I burst into the open. I blindly pumped a handful of rounds into the far building, hoping the suppression would buy me a few seconds.

In two steps, I was at Barker’s feet. I dropped my rifle, letting it hang from the clip attaching it to my shoulder, and grabbed his ankle. He wasn’t a small man, weighing at least two hundred pounds. Adding that to the heavy gear we all had to lug around, and I struggled just to get him moving.

Sandford unloaded across the street. He screamed as he fired.

We inched backward as I heaved against Barker’s weight with everything I had. The heels of my boots skidded in the dirt with each step. Fear pulsed through me as the first tufts of dust flitted into the air beside my feet as the sniper’s bullets honed in.

My head snapped back, and I heard a thud as a round glanced off my helmet. The force knocked me to my ass.

Sandford’s rifle clicked. “Reloading!”

I grabbed my weapon and raised it again, shooting over Barker’s prone body. With my legs splayed out in front of me, I scanned the windows of the dingy apartment complex again as I continued firing.

And then I spotted it—muzzle flare.

“Third floor, second window from the right!” I spaced my shots, not wanting to shoot my wad until Sandford was ready again.

“I see him!” The private sent another volley at the open window, and the sniper’s firing ceased for a moment.

I clambered back to my feet and grabbed Barker. His torso was halfway through the doorway when the shooter started again. The frame splintered by my knees as I dragged him the rest of the way in.

Flipped the sergeant over.

Blood everywhere.

Eyes open and glassy.

“Goddamn it.”

Sandford dropped under the window again. “Are you hit, LT?”

“No, but we need to get him out of here right now.” My head thrummed from the ricochet. The stress and pain made it difficult to think clearly.

“What’re we gonna do?” Tremors ran through Sandford’s voice. He jammed another magazine into his rifle.

“We’re going out the back. I’m going to carry him out first, while you lay down another round of suppressing fire. Got it?”

He nodded and wiped at the sweat running down his brow from under his helmet.

I bent down and lifted Barker’s limp arm, pulling it over my shoulders. His head lolled on his neck. The weight of his rag-dolled body fought against me as I struggled to get him off the floor.

I got his waist against my shoulder and managed to pull him onto my upper back. My knees creaked as I straightened out, teetering as I shifted his weight to distribute it better. Cords stuck out on my neck.

“Give me one more line of fire while I carry him out, then you follow.” My words were clipped, breathless.

Sandford slid over to the door. “Ready.” He popped into the opening and loosed another burst.

I made it halfway across the room when he shouted behind me.

“RPG!”

The explosion hammered my ears. The wave of heat thrust me toward the door, and I struggled to stay on my feet with Barker on my shoulders.

Sandford ran into us, shoving us along even faster.

As I turned sideways to fit through the doorway, I caught a glimpse of the front of the house. A wide, dust-filled hole ate up most of the front wall, the space between the door and window gone.

My ears rang.

I straightened out and ran through a squalid, empty kitchen. We paused at the rear door, and I nodded at it. "You first."

"What?" Sandford banged his left ear with his hand. Grime covered his face. "I can't hear shit!"

Barker's weight strained my neck and shoulders. "Go!"

He must have heard me because he plunged through the doorway, rifle at the ready. Never breaking stride, he scanned both directions and disappeared into the backyard. The kid was kicking ass.

My eyes struggled to adjust to the brightness outside. The sun always blasted you like a furnace in Iraq, making sunglasses a basic requirement. Mine had fallen off at some point during the firefight, though I couldn't remember when.

Blowing dust stung my cheeks as I cleared the house. Sandford shouted something from ahead, but I couldn't make it out. The fog of war blotted out half of my senses.

The street behind the house stood empty. Usually it would have been teeming with civilians and small goats. Every living thing but us had fled when the shooting started.

"Where the hell is Brady?"

The Humvee came barreling down the unpaved road to our right. Brady sat at the wheel. It slid to a stop by Sandford, who was still shouting incoherently.

The ringing in my ears abated slightly as I ran to the driver's side. Pain twisted into my knees with each step. Barker's blood ran down my shoulder, soaking into my jacket. It coursed over my hands as I held onto his equipment to keep him from falling off me.

The thrumming gunfire from the other side of the house intensified.

Brady jumped out of the vehicle and opened the back door, waving me toward it. "Is he alive?"

I didn't reply because I didn't know. When I got within two feet, I lowered my right shoulder and leaned into the open door. Barker flopped onto the rear seat, his arm hanging limply to the floor. His eyes were wide open, unseeing.

"Get us the fuck out of here!" I shoved Barker's feet in the door and slammed it shut.

Specialist Brady hopped in behind the wheel.

Sandford stood by the rear bumper, firing at the side of the house in small bursts. I grabbed him and dragged him around to the other side. Brady had the truck rolling before we'd even closed the doors.

The windshield spider-webbed in front of me.

Bullets dented the hood and fender.

"Get pressure on his wound!" I shouted back at Sandford.

“Lieutenant Benson, are you hit? Your helmet is fucked up.” Brady kept glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m fine. Just get us the hell out of here.”

“Yes, sir.”

When we rounded a corner two blocks away from the house, the gunfire finally died down behind us. I unstrapped my helmet and took it off.

The fabric by the area just above my left temple was torn away.

Son of a bitch had missed my face by three inches.

Cars swerved in front of us as we flew down a side street.

The citizens of Iraq held no regard for traffic laws or decorum. They did whatever the hell they wanted. Driving was complete madness, and we didn’t have time for that shit.

Brady rammed the back end of a Dodge Shadow, sending it careening off to the side.

“Drive on the sidewalk if you have to.”

My hands started shaking. I dropped my helmet to the floor and stared at my trembling fingers. Blood dripped from my knuckles.

I wiped my hands on my dust-covered pants, mixing the dirt and blood into a grime.

I couldn’t get them clean. The filth nestled in the lines of my palms and the crooks of my fingers, refusing to come off. The sight sent a fresh wave of dread through me.

My throat bobbed as I fought to keep my emotions in check.

*Focus.*

“How is he?” I turned and looked into the backseat.

Sandford held Barker’s head in his lap. Tears cleaned lines down the private’s soiled cheeks. He’d closed Barker’s eyes.

I reached for my friend’s hand, fighting against the scream building in my throat.

A deafening roar popped my eardrums.

A concussive force lifted my body, spinning me around in midair.

Brady screamed beside me.

The world outside flipped as the Humvee rolled. Flames licked across what was left of the front end.

My head cracked off the window beside me.

And everything went black.



## 2 - Banking with Beer

I hated waiting in line for beer.

It was like the ultimate tease. I had the case in my hands. They were begging me to drink them, and I couldn't give them what they wanted because some lady in the front of the line had to count out exact change for her box of wine.

My bank account was getting low, so I had to settle for an el cheapo brand. Sucked. It was probably going to give me lockjaw from all the lead in it. The hangover would be brutal.

Booze was the only thing I'd found that could dull the goddamn echoes in my mind. Right now, I was struggling not to hear the perverted thoughts of the guy right in front of me as he stared at the ass of Exact-Change Lady. It didn't take a psychic to know what he was thinking because of the way he was ogling her backside.

The problem, though, was that I *could* read minds.

Sounded fun, right? It wasn't.

It sucked ass.

People thought some pretty awful things. The guy in front of me was a raunchy douche. The woman ahead of him was condescending as hell. Right now, she was wondering if the Middle-Eastern cashier was a terrorist.

As I stood in line, watching Exact-Change Lady count pennies, I felt my mental barriers crumbling. It required an incredible amount of willpower and energy for me to block out the voices of anyone within fifty yards of me.

Alcohol took the edge off. Unfortunately, it took a lot of drinking, and I had to spread the amount out. Beer worked best— liquor put me facedown on the floor.

Three more people walked into the store, and the weight pressing down on my mind multiplied. I couldn't take it anymore. My hand tore open the end of the thirty-pack before I even realized what I was doing.

Everyone in line turned around and gaped at me when I popped the top on the can. I shrugged and took a big gulp.

Issam, the cashier, shook his head. He gave me the same lecture every time I started drinking in the store, which, sadly, happened pretty often. It was against policy, blah, blah, blah. Dude thought I was a raging alcoholic, which I supposed I was by normal standards.

The first beer was already gone by the time it was my turn to pay. The voices were still raging. I needed at least three more brews to bring them down to a dull roar. It was hard to describe what the constant pinging in my mind sounded like, but calling them continuous echoes was as close as I could come.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to drink in the store?” Issam asked.

“This is the last time, I promise.”

“You say that *every* time.”

I took a swig from beer number two and handed him my debit card. I had a whole thirty dollars on it. Fuck my life. “It’s not my fault that you count change at a snail’s pace. I wouldn’t have to drink in here if your math skills were above the third grade level.”

He grinned at me. “It’s these damn American schools. They’re terrible.”

“You didn’t go to school here.”

“But your low IQs are wearing off on me. You know what I am saying, G.I. Joe?”

We went through this routine at least three times a week. He was a cool guy, despite what he thought about me. One time he saw my military identification card in my wallet and had called me G.I. Joe ever since. Thought it was hilarious.

He also tried to use American slang, particularly of the urban variety, and it made him sound like a cartoon character.

“I have no idea what you’re saying. I’m smart as shit. My mom said so.” It was getting harder to concentrate on our conversation with each passing second.

“You should really slow down, G.I. Joe. That poison isn’t good for you.” He nodded at the beer in my hand as he handed my card back.

“Tell me about it.”

“I just did.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at him. He was learning how to be a wise-ass from me. We’d been doing this dance for almost six months now, and he’d picked up quite a few of my best lines.

“See you in two days. Try not to open any 7-Elevens by then.”

“Try not to get drunk and fall down the stairs again.”

“Har har.” I was mugged a few weeks ago while I was completely shithouse drunk. The guys beat me up pretty badly and stole my beer. I told Issam that I

fell down the stairs.

He wouldn't let it go.

I hung a left outside the door and walked down the sidewalk, not even trying to hide the open can. People stared at me in open contempt as I went past them.

If I didn't quiet the voices in my head soon, I'd end up curled in the fetal position in a gutter.

*When are they going to clean this city up?* thought a squat woman as she shuffled past, a deep frown aimed at me. *How disgusting.*

It took a lot of willpower for me not to respond to people like that.

But I marched on. Sadly, I was used to the derision. Besides, almost no one ever said anything to my face. I was a hair over 6'4" and pushing close to 220. People were as afraid of my size as they were disgusted by my drinking.

Some people didn't recognize an Adonis when they saw one.

My apartment complex was three blocks from the liquor store. When I'd moved back into the city six months ago, I made sure to find a place that gave me quick access to a swill slinger. It worked out for my mental health, if not necessarily for my liver.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I trudged on. Even the cool beer couldn't take the edge off the heat wave camping out over the Eastern seaboard. Baltimore was always hot, but this was ridiculous.

I chugged down beer number two and tossed the empty into a garbage can. Nothing but net. Eat your heart out, Kobe.

A buzz formed behind my eyes, and the concert blaring in my head quieted to a dull hum. I could still hear the voices, but they weren't shouting over each other quite so much. Soon, I would be at the point where I could pinpoint one or two and focus on them. That was when I was the most comfortable.

When the day was young, and my energy reserves weren't running on empty, I could do that without the use of booze. The afternoon had already come and gone though, and I was hurting.

My Brazilian jiu-jitsu class ended about half an hour ago. Whenever I left there, I was completely exhausted and struggled to focus. The workouts were so intense, that the next day I felt like a million bucks. The conditioning had helped me turn my life around, but I always had issues getting through the night without having some alcohol to help me.

Being in shape helped me hone my mental abilities. The problem was that I paid the price after a particularly hard workout. It was a vicious cycle. I was like a drunk who drank in the morning to get rid of his hangover, but then ended up blotto by noon. The difference, I suppose, was that I actually got some benefits out of it.

A muted blast stopped me in my tracks less than a block from my place.

I knew that sound.

A gunshot.

Shit.

I stood on the sidewalk, a box of beer under one arm, an open can suspended by the other, and listened. The sound didn't come again, but I knew what I'd heard.

A bank sat off to my left. I had a perpetually ailing account there. No one came or went from the door, even though closing time was fast approaching. Everyone did their banking there after work, and it was usually jam-packed right around then.

I took a few steps closer to the door and almost fell over. Panicked cries filled my thoughts, overwhelming me. My knees wobbled as I struggled to keep from falling.

As I staggered to the front of the bank, I noticed that I couldn't see into the glass doors. I leaned against the brick wall and took a few deep breaths. Squeezed my eyes shut, focused.

Instead of fighting against the echoes, I relaxed and let them in.

Fear. Lots of fear.

The people inside were panicking to the twenty-fifth power.

At least a dozen thought streams floated to me, maybe more. It was hard to get a grasp on how many people were inside.

I relaxed even further, feeling my way through the mostly incoherent emotions. Someone had been shot.

And then I felt anger and despair. A man by the tellers' booths.

An armed robber.

I hadn't even realized people still held up banks at gunpoint. That felt so 1980s to me. I thought crooks ripped people off electronically now, using the stock market or government handouts. What kind of dumbass would try this?

Wrapping my mind around his, I grasped the tendrils of his thoughts. He was just as scared as the people he threatened. His memories flitted through my mind's eye like a child's flipbook.

In a handful of seconds, I knew everything about him.

Perceived his fears and motivations. Understood his problems.

Saw what drove a father of three to such desperate measures.

He'd already accidentally shot one man. Before today, he'd never even held a gun. When it went off in his hands, the sound had frightened him more than he'd expected. The stink of the spent shell hammered home that he'd just seriously wounded a man.

His name was William, and irrationality had him teetering on the brink of no return.

Before I had time to think about what I was doing, I opened the door and stepped inside.

The entrance smelled of paint. William had sprayed the opposite side of the glass black to keep anyone walking by from seeing inside.

Smart.

He'd forgotten to lock the door so no one could walk in. Someone like me.

Dumb.

A bell tolled overhead as I walked in. The dozen or so people lying on the floor all turned their heads and looked at me. They were hoping for a police officer. Instead, they got a drunken military vet.

The way their faces fell when they saw me would have been comical if it wasn't so indicative of my appearance.

William, bank robber extraordinaire, spun around, pointing a shotgun at my chest. He stood in front of a fresh-faced, teary-eyed female teller.

I sipped my beer. "Hey, Bill."

"Don't move!" He stormed over to me, doing his best to act like a hardened criminal.

His thoughts betrayed his façade.

"Want a beer?" I asked. "They taste like ass, but it gets the job done."

"What? Get down!" He stopped five feet away from me, the gun held by his hip.

"Can't do that, William."

His head snapped back as if I'd slapped him. "How do you know my name? Who are you?"

"Kris sent me."

"Kris?" His mouth hung slack. "My wife?"

I nodded. "She knows that you lost everything. She understands that the house is being foreclosed on, and that your savings accounts are empty." Of course, the real-life Kris had no idea any of this was happening, but I had to talk him down. "She wants you to come home."

"But I shot a man. They'll never let me go home again." His voice rose an octave as he spoke. "I can't ever face my family again. I'm a failure and a coward."

His thoughts were even more erratic than his words. If the robbery didn't go as planned, he intended to commit suicide-by-cop so his family could get his life insurance. I was pretty sure that an insurance company wouldn't pay out under those circumstances.



I took another sip and looked around the bank, trying to act nonchalant. I was scared shitless. Having a gun pointed at you would clench anyone's ass cheeks. Walking in here was beyond idiotic. "Failure is relative, William."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I have no idea. I was trying to sound philosophical."

He thought, *Where are the goddamn cops? Who is this asshole?*

"The cops will be here soon, but you don't need them to kill you to get out of this. Do you think Olivia, Elliot, and Brooklyn will be better off without their father?"

He gaped at me. "Who the hell *are* you?"

"I'm your guardian angel, and I'm here to stop you from taking this any further."

"My guardian angel chugs beer?" The end of his shotgun trembled.

I shrugged. "Why not? Jesus turned water into wine, right?"

"Just get on the ground, you crazy asshole." He raised the gun to his shoulder and sighted my chest.

My bladder felt very full as I looked into the shadowed opening of the barrel. "I can't do that, William. I know what you want to happen."

A slender, brown-haired woman on the floor to my right waved at me. "Do as he says!"

"Relax, Sammy. Everything is going to be fine." I gave her a wink.

Her eyes widened. "How do you—?"

The whoop of sirens came from down the street. If I didn't get this guy down in the next thirty seconds, he would be killed.

I finished off my beer and crushed the can in my hand like the Hulk. "You sure you don't want one?" Bringing the case out from under my arm, I reached inside.

"I told you—"

I threw the box at his gun.

Ducked down.

William, shocked by the sudden movement, jerked the trigger. The buckshot hit the case, sending suds, cardboard, and fragments of aluminum cascading down on me.

I sprang forward, launching at his torso.

He was so inexperienced with the weapon that he didn't even rack the slide to eject the empty shell. I heard the gun click as I reached him. With my left arm, I shoved the barrel aside.

My right shot out like a piston, catching him square on the jaw with a straight punch.

He crumpled to the floor, unconscious, rubbery limbs flopping in all directions. The shotgun clattered down beside him. I kicked it away and stared down at him, making sure he wouldn't get back up.

Beer dripped from my face. I licked my lips.

"Is... is he out?" Sammy asked. She slowly got up, eyeing him cautiously. As she stood, I noticed for the first time that she had incredibly large breasts. Her low-cut tank top didn't leave much to the imagination.

It took a lot of willpower not to drool.

"Yeah, he's taking a little nap." I shook the pain out of my hand. In the movies, guys had epic fights and never suffered from the consequences. In real life, landing a punch hurt like hell.

My hand was probably going to swell.

Sucked, because that was my best drinking hand.

The case of beer was ruined. I stared at it longingly as everyone got to their feet and walked over to me. A few of the cans weren't destroyed, so I grabbed them and stuffed them in my pockets.

Without that swill, it would be a long night.

*Are there any others?*

*Who is this guy?*

*I think I peed myself.*

As the former hostages closed in around me, their thoughts bogged me down again. Cracking another brew, I chugged half of it down. I tried not to make eye contact with the man who had a slight discoloration around his crotch.

Poor bastard.

Two people attended to the shot man, applying pressure to his shredded stomach. He was awake and alert, but pain twisted his face. I took a step toward him to help when I heard the sirens get even louder.

The cops would be here soon, and the questions would start. They wouldn't let me drink. There was no way I could get through an entire night at the police station—not in my condition. The press would be up my ass when the authorities finished with me. I didn't need any of that noise.

*Ohmygod! All that blood!*

*Is he going to survive?*

*I hope no one can see this pee spot.*

*Am I going to be on TV?*

I grimaced against the barrage of thoughts slamming around inside my brain. I had to get out of there before the police sealed the bank off.

"Keep pressure on his stomach. The paramedics will be here soon," I said.

As I moved toward the door, I scooped up the last of the beer that hadn't been destroyed. That made five total—not enough to get me through the night. I could only hope that it took enough of the edge off to let me sleep.

“Where are you going?” Sammy asked. “The police are almost here.”

“I think I left the oven on,” I called over my shoulder.

“You’re leaving? But we don’t even know your name!”

I didn’t answer her as I stopped at the door, cracking it open. None of the police cruisers were visible yet, but they were loud enough that I knew it would only be seconds before they got there.

“Wait!” Sammy ran over, her breasts bouncing as she came.

My eyes drifted over to them as if they had some kind of homing beacon.

She leaned forward and kissed my beer-soaked cheek. “Thank you.”

My face flushed. “You’re welcome.” I pushed through the doors and hurried down the sidewalk.

The first police cruiser slid through the intersection ahead of me, the siren blaring. I ducked my head down and kept going, hoping they couldn’t see my face. It probably made me look suspicious, but my head was scrambled and I just wanted to get back to my apartment.

The black and white flew past me before skidding to a stop in front of the bank. Two cops jumped out, guns out of their holsters. I kept going.

Another dozen sirens reported through the streets as I crossed the intersection. No one stopped me.

Sipped my beer.

There were a lot of cameras in that bank. How long would it be before someone came looking for me?

## 3 - Chewed Out

Turns out that it didn't take long.

Knuckles rapped against my door, bringing me out of a restless sleep.

The handful of beers hadn't been enough to quiet my mind, and I spent most of the night fighting to ignore the thoughts of my neighbors. It was past midnight by the time they'd all fallen asleep, giving me a little bit of peace.

Though I'd only had a few hours of sleep, it was enough to let me recover.

I opened my eyes, squinting against the sunlight shining through my bare windows. I didn't have enough money to buy curtains or blinds. My mouth was dry from boozing and not chasing it with water.

The knocking grew more intense.

"Open the door, Ash."

I recognized the voice. Drew. Detective Andrew Lloyd.

He was an old army buddy, one of the few I'd talked to since my discharge. He rarely came by my apartment, so something had to be wrong for him to be standing at my door.

Drew was also the only person in the world who knew about my ability to hear other people's thoughts.

And by ability, I meant curse.

We'd gone through Officer Candidate School together, having graduated college at the same time. Because we both had smart mouths, we spent a lot of time scrubbing toilets and doing pushups side by side after getting snippy with superior officers. He was the one who'd helped guide me back from the brink of oblivion and convinced me to turn my life around.

I owed him a lot.

My mattress sat on the floor with only a sheet covering it. No box spring or bedspread. I couldn't afford those kinds of luxuries. The mattress came free off a Craigslist ad.

I tried not to think about who must have owned it before me. If I ever looked at it with a black light, I'd probably shoot myself.

My hand still throbbed as I rolled off the bed and pushed myself to my feet. Some swelling puffed out the knuckles, but it wasn't too bad. Didn't feel broken, anyway.

"What?" I walked across the room, kicking empty beer cans out of the way. I lived in a studio apartment approximately the size of a matchbook. Paint was peeling off the walls.

"Let me in. We need to talk."

I opened the door, wincing against the light that came in. Booze hangovers didn't really affect me anymore, but I got hellacious headaches if I had to spend the night listening to other people's thoughts

Drew stood in the doorway, wearing his usual black suit. He shaved his head because he'd started balding at the age of twenty-five. I often asked him how he liked living in Reseda. His suit was a bit tight around the chest and shoulders because he'd added a significant amount of size since he bought it.

The two of us lifted weights together three days a week, and he was one of those guys who could add muscle with ease. Pissed me off. I was still bigger than he was, but that was mostly because I had a larger frame.

He looked me up and down. "Christ, Ash. Couldn't you put some fucking clothes on before answering the door?"

The only thing I had on was a pair of boxer briefs. I glanced down at them and shrugged. "Is it upsetting for you to see what a real man looks like? Jealousy doesn't suit you."

Drew snorted. "Yeah, I'm real jealous of a guy who looks like he just came off a three-day bender."

"I'm coming off a five-year bender."

"Let me in—we need to have a come-to-Jesus moment."

I stepped aside and waved him in. "Welcome to Casa de Shithole."

He walked to the middle of the room and peered around, his face twisting in a grimace.

"The maid doesn't come until Thursday." I closed the door and walked over to the couch, flopping onto it. I'd picked up my sparse furniture at Goodwill when I moved back into the city. It didn't smell the nicest. None of it was particularly comfortable either. The beer helped with that too.

"You live like a crackhead." He nudged one of the beer cans with his toe. "You could at least use a garbage can."

"I'd like to see if you worry about where your empties go when you're trying to block out your neighbor's thoughts as he jacks off to internet porn half the night."



He squinted at an empty pizza box. It sat on my coffee table, which was missing a leg. I'd used a few books in that corner. It was mostly level. Mostly.

"Since when can you afford to order pizza? If you can pay for that, then you can at least buy an extra garbage can to put beside your couch."

"I had a free coupon." I got up and walked over to the sink, turning the faucet on. I drank straight from the tap.

"How did you tip the delivery boy?"

I wiped water from my chin. "Gave him a beer. He was pretty happy about it."

"Was he twenty-one?"

"Did you come down here to shit on my life, or do you *actually* have something you want to talk to me about?" I didn't really need him pointing out that my life sucked. A blind man could see that.

He held his hands up. "Hey, I'm just trying to make sure you keep on climbing the mountain. You've come a long way, and I don't want you to fall back down."

I opened the fridge and looked inside. There was a box of old Chinese food on the top shelf and not much else. That box had been there since I'd moved in. I closed the door again. "I'm fine."

"This doesn't look fine, Ash."

"It's—" I looked around my apartment for a clock before remembering that I didn't have one. "What time is it?"

Drew looked at a swanky watch on his wrist. "Nine."

"It's nine in the morning, and I'm not drunk yet. That's a damn sight better than I was six months ago, so cut me some slack." I pulled on a pair of basketball shorts I found balled up in the corner by my mattress.

"Fair enough," he said. "You have put on some weight too, so I guess I should keep things in perspective."

"So you are jealous of my looks."

When Drew had found me hiding out in the mountains of West Virginia, I weighed less than a hundred and sixty pounds. Considering my frame and height, that was not so good. People who saw me in town, (buying beer, of course) thought I had cancer or was addicted to meth.

After the IED hit my Humvee in Iraq, I didn't wake up for almost two weeks. When I finally came back around, I couldn't even remember my own name. My memories were hazy, dancing around just outside of my recollection. Confusion fogged my entire life.

It took about a month for most of my memories to return. They'd sent me back to the States, and I was in a room at Walter Reed Army Medical Center

when I heard the first echo. The damn thing scared the hell out of me.

I sat bolt upright in my bed, looking around for someone else in the room.

But no one was there.

Things got a lot worse over the next couple of weeks. I tried to explain that I was hearing voices in my head to the doctors, but I quickly realized that would earn me a permanent stay in the loony bin.

The Army had really started to crack down on soldiers and officers they thought had PTSD. If they thought I was a danger to anyone, as hearing voices in my head would indicate, then they wouldn't release me. I knew this because I could literally hear what my doctors were thinking about me.

So I started telling them what they wanted to hear.

It was hard to do though, because any time more than two or three people came into my room, I had trouble focusing. Imagine having three people standing beside you, all screaming into your ears at the same time. That was my life.

As the Hummer flipped over and over in the middle of that shitty street, my head bounced around like a racquetball. The traumatic brain injury I suffered was what kick-started this whole telepathy bullshit.

At least, that was as close as I could figure.

I could have stayed in the hospital and let them jam tubes and needles in me forever, but to hell with that. Besides, anyone who had ever been inside the military healthcare system could tell you about the quality of their care.

Eventually, I was honorably discharged due to the lingering effects from the brain injury, and from what my doctors believed was a mild case of post-traumatic stress disorder. The official reports cited a withdrawal from social situations, increased agitation, difficulty communicating, chronic fatigue, and other anxiety symptoms.

They were right, of course—I suffered from all of those things, but it wasn't because of PTSD.

The brain trauma allowed me to get disability from the military. That was what paid the rent, bought my beer, and covered the gym membership. My checks weren't big enough to pay for anything else.

When I got out of the hospital, the echoes were so bad that I couldn't bear to be around other people. So I fled to the mountains, renting a dingy cabin for three hundred bucks a month. I discovered that alcohol helped blunt the worst of it. But, in order for me to have the cash for booze, I couldn't eat much.

The weight loss came quickly.

The guilt I felt over losing my men, *all* of them, pushed me to drink even more. I was the only one who didn't have a family, and yet I made it out of there.

It was hard to describe survivor's guilt, but it was real and severe, and anyone who said otherwise was an asshole.

Barker's death was the one that bothered me the most. His wife and little boy came to visit me in the hospital. I bawled like a baby when they walked in. That kid would never know how great of a man his dad was. Seeing pictures and hearing stories about your father didn't equate.

I could feel the conflicted emotions coming off Lisa Barker. She was both relieved and saddened that I had survived. She wished it was her husband there in the bed instead of me, and then she hated herself for feeling that way. Her hand squeezed mine as she looked down at me, imagining that I was Barker. I wished he were the one there with her too.

I still had nightmares about his blood on my hands.

No one blamed me for wanting to get away when I moved to West Virginia. The mountains gave me the solitude I needed, just not for the reasons everyone thought. They assumed I wanted time alone to gather *my* thoughts, when I was actually trying to escape *theirs*.

To my shame, I abandoned all of them. I couldn't stand to hear their sadness, or taste their disdain for my survival and their loss.

I'd been living in the middle of nowhere for going on four years when Drew Lloyd knocked on my door. We hadn't spoken since I'd left Iraq with my injured head swollen to the size of a basketball.

He'd tracked me down through a series of townies a few miles away. They pointed him toward the drunkard living off a jeep trail.

By the time he arrived at noon, I was already plowed.

He pitied me when I opened the door, and he saw my appearance. He didn't say it aloud, but I heard it nonetheless.

"Fuck you!" I'd screamed at him. "I don't need your pity. I'm alive and they're dead, so pity them."

Drew had seen his share of shit over in the sandbox. He understood half of what I was dealing with.

My inebriation hadn't allowed me to understand that at the time, however. I tried to shoo him away as I had everyone else. The stubborn bastard wouldn't leave though. I shouted horrible things at him, but he wouldn't budge.

And then my anger and drunkenness led me to make a big mistake. I used something against him that he'd never told me before. Something he'd never told anyone. Something I'd read in his mind.

About how his father had abandoned him.

It was a piece-of-shit move, but my mind was so addled by alcohol, guilt, and hate that I didn't even know what I was saying.

But Drew was as cool as a cucumber. He picked up on that thread and kept pulling at it until my cloak of lies fell apart. I was blubbing like a baby by midafternoon. At first, he wasn't certain that he believed what I told him about hearing people's thoughts, but we squashed that in a hurry.

He would think about a color or a fruit, and I would tell him exactly what it was. It blew his mind. I know because I was in it, even though I didn't want to be.

With his support and advice, I slowly started my climb back to the land of the living. It was his idea to start fixating on physical fitness. Drew said that the mind and body were connected and that sharpening one would help to focus the other.

He was right.

As my ability to control my mind grew, my dependency on booze lessened. I still needed it, but I wasn't drinking a gallon of vodka every day. Switching from liquor to beer made a big difference on my ability to function.

Drew drove from Baltimore a lot to help me out. He wanted to make sure that I wasn't backsliding, and it helped keep me accountable.

A year later, and here I was, sitting in his home city, listening to him give me hell about my life. Things were better, but I still had a long way to go. Moving to a populated area was his idea, and it turned out to be a good one.

Having people's thoughts constantly bombarding me had really strengthened my mental power. I learned to hone in on one person's mind, blocking out the others. I could flip through their memories, searching for something specific, rather than being helpless and only seeing whatever popped up.

Instead of spending my money on nothing but alcohol, I now blew most of my disability check on rent, jiu-jitsu classes, and boxing instructions. And a little more food, thank God.

I owed Drew my life.

"Blah blah blah," he said, dismissing me with a wave. "I didn't come here for the witty banter. You had a busy evening."

I was sniffing a shirt I found crumpled under the coffee table. It smelled good enough to wear if I rubbed some deodorant on the inside of it. "Me? Busy?" I knew he was talking about the bank, but I wanted to screw with him for a bit.

"Don't screw with me, Ash."

I laughed. Nailed that one.

"What?"

"Nothing."

“Cut the bullshit. I saw the security footage from the bank last night. You ran away from the scene of a serious crime.”

“A crime I didn’t commit. So what? I was hurting bad, and I knew I wouldn’t have the strength to go through a night of questioning.”

“So, your face is plastered all over the news. The press is looking for a hero. Imagine their surprise when they find you.”

I gave him the finger.

His face hardened. “That was a pretty crazy thing you did. Walking up to a man with a shotgun isn’t going to extend your life expectancy.”

“Hooah.”

“Oh, shut up.” Drew rolled his eyes.

One of Drew’s biggest pet peeves while we were commissioned was the overuse of ‘hooah’ by a handful of the soldiers underneath him. It drove him nuts. He thought that he’d never have to hear that word again once he got out of the army. I tried to work one or two in every day now, just to piss him off.

Worked like a charm.

I put the shirt on and caught a whiff of something unpleasant. Took it back off. “Did the guy who was shot survive?”

“He’s in critical condition, but they think he’ll make it. Look, Ash, it’s not just the press who are looking for you.”

“The police? Newsflash, Drew—you’re a cop.”

“Thanks for the tip. I’m taking care of things on my end—you’ll be fine there. A federal agent came around the department this morning. He was asking a lot of questions.”

That caught my attention. “About the bank robbery?”

“No. About you. Personally.”

“He knew who I was?”

“Not yet, but it won’t be long. I slipped out the back and came here before someone told him that we’re friends.”

I found a different shirt and put it on. It had a picture of Stewie from Family Guy on it. He was holding a bomb or something. Very classy. “What agency was he from? He give a name?”

“He flashed a badge, but I didn’t recognize it. Said his name was Johnson.”

“Johnson? How original.”

Drew’s phone chirped in his pocket. He pulled it out and answered, turning his back to me. “Detective Lloyd.” He paused, listening.

My stomach grumbled as I waited for him to finish. It had been almost a full day since I had anything to eat. Between my workouts and the beer consumption, my gut was less than thrilled with me.

Drew turned around and snapped his fingers at the television. He tilted the phone away from his mouth. "Turn on the news."

I walked over to the TV and turned it on. The remote disappeared about a month before. The television was old as dirt too, so I had to use one of those boxes to convert the digital signal to analog. Not sure why I even bothered since I never watched the damn thing.

After flipping through all five channels, I settled on NBC.

A disheveled man stood behind a podium, a pistol held to his head.

"Holy shit," Drew said. "That's Senator McArthur."

## 4 - Enter Murdock

The gaggle of reporters standing before the podium lobbed questions at McArthur.

His disheveled, blood-splattered appearance had everyone on edge.

The senator stared straight ahead, tears coursing down his cheeks, cutting clean lines through speckles of blood. His salt-and-pepper hair stood on end, streaks of crimson staining sections of it.

Both of his hands were stuffed in his pockets, concealing what he went there to do.

Murdock stood just behind the group of reporters, watching with amusement as they tried to coax answers out of McArthur.

If not for the rage twisting Murdock's stomach, he would have laughed. It had been months since something had struck him as funny.

He looked down at his left hand, glowering at the stump where the ring finger should have been. The pain-ridden memory of its removal slithered into his mind before he could push it back down.

The cell he'd been held in was closer to a root cellar than a jail. No windows. The dank air didn't circulate. Murdock reeked of sweat and blood and despair. What day was it? How long had he been there? His toenails were getting long.

Murdock didn't know the man standing before him, but he assumed that he was about to meet his new torturer. It was only later that Murdock would learn his name: Adeeb Azizi. Born and raised in Afghanistan. Educated in America.

He was short and thin. Bearded. Intelligent, cold eyes, that were much like Murdock's. His teeth were straight and white, creating a dichotomy with his disheveled clothing and hair.

And right then, during their first session, he held out a dull knife to Murdock.

"Remove a finger," he'd said. His English was impeccable, his accent slight. It was Murdock's first hint that this man had travelled beyond the cave system he inhabited.



“What?” Murdock didn’t want to take the blade. Nothing good could come of it. If he had more strength, he would have snatched it away and plunged it straight into the man’s neck. It had been days since they’d fed him. He could barely stand.

“Any finger. Your choice.”

Murdock’s blood pressure rose. He shifted on the dirt floor.

The man knocked on the rusted, metal door behind him. It opened, and two more men came in.

Both had AK-47s.

One held a machete.

The door closed behind them.

Murdock swallowed bile that rose in his throat. He tried to focus on the man’s mind, but the drugs coursing through his system kept him in check. They dosed him every few hours, never allowing him to regain his faculties.

The man knelt in front of Murdock. “I want us to be friends. Friends help each other. My colleagues want to take your hand.” He gestured to the machete.

Murdock’s cracked lips quivered.

“But I’ve convinced them to settle for a finger. They’ve agreed, but only if you remove it yourself.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve even negotiated another allowance—you get to choose which finger.”

He tossed the knife onto the dirt between Murdock’s feet.

They all stared at the blade for several seconds before the machete-armed guard took a step forward. The glee on his face as he lifted the miniature sword told Murdock what would happen next.

With a trembling hand, he grabbed the knife. What finger would he need the least?

Murdock pulled himself back to the present. His teeth ground as he turned his attention back to the senator.

The press conference was for a congressman announcing some new bill about a matter of little consequence. Murdock had something a little juicier in mind.

Upon their arrival, McArthur had walked to the podium and pushed the congressman out of the way. The angered representative had tried to shove his way back to the microphone, but stopped himself when he saw the blood in McArthur’s hair. The dumbfounded looks on everyone’s faces at that moment had almost made Murdock smile.

*Almost.*

Murdock looked at a female reporter directly in front of him. She wore a pantsuit that was less than flattering to her wide frame. Murdock focused on her, letting the other whispers in his mind fall away.

*This idiot is committing career suicide. I need to get this in to Tommy before Fox runs with it.*

Shaking his head, Murdock turned his attention back to McArthur. The reporter thought the senator was committing career suicide. He planned to give her a bigger story. His career would be the least of everyone's concerns soon.

Murdock tilted his head back, letting the warmth of the sun wash over his face. So much time in a dirt and stone cell had given him a greater appreciation for the outdoors. Even the miserable, humid heat wave sweeping through the region wasn't an annoyance to him.

A few other cameramen ran over and recorded the events, whispering confused questions to their colleagues. They framed the senator against the backdrop of the Capitol building, setting an iconic image for the audience at home.

All the better to help drive Murdock's message home.

McArthur's throat worked as he looked over the small crowd before him.

Random passersby meandered over, drawn by the light on the cameras like moths to a flame.

Murdock finally grinned. This was going better than he could have hoped. The smile felt foreign. Uncomfortable.

He let it grow.

It was time to watch America burn. Time to light the kindling.

McArthur cleared his throat. "I've done terrible things in my years in the senate. It's time I atoned for my sins. I've abandoned our soldiers and agents to torment and murder. I've ordered the torture of our enemies. My actions have led to the deaths of thousands of innocents. Today, I repay my debts. Today is judgment day." Fresh tears welled in his eyes. "Senator McArthur sat on a wall; Senator McArthur had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put McArthur back together again."

The reporters murmured confused questions to each other.

McArthur pulled his hands from his pockets. They looked as if they'd been dipped in a bucket of red paint.

He gripped a .38 in his right hand. It shook violently as he slowly raised it until the end of the barrel rested against his temple.

The crowd of reporters exploded as they implored him to put the gun down. Bystanders in the back fled, dragging along their families and crying out for

help. Someone ran toward the podium, pleading for the senator to hand the pistol over.

Murdock and McArthur stared at one another over the heads of the reporters.

“Burn, baby, burn,” they said in unison.

McArthur pulled the trigger.

## 5 - Magical Boobs

The side of his head burst in a shower of blood and bone and brain matter.

Pandemonium broke out amongst the reporters who ran in every direction, screaming and crying. The camera jostled wildly as the operator tried to push his way through the crowd.

The station cut away from the bloody body of McArthur, changing to a newscaster sitting at her desk as she stared in horror at a monitor. “I, uhh...”

Drew turned to me, mouth agape, phone hanging by his side. “Holy shit.”

I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t every day that you witnessed the suicide of a senator, let alone had it broadcasted to the entire country. For a moment, I wondered if the whole thing was a publicity stunt by NBC.

The person on the other end of the call to Drew shouted. He raised it to his ear again. “Sorry, what was that? *What?* Jesus Christ. What’s the address?” He ended the call and dropped the cell into his pocket.

He stared at the floor for a few seconds.

“What is it?” I asked.

“They found the senator’s wife and two children murdered at their house. It looks like he did it. The way he killed them was brutal.”

Once again, I was at a loss for words. Guess it wasn’t a stunt after all.

Drew snapped out of it and walked to the door. “Let’s go. Their house is just south of the city.”

“What? Why would I go with you?”

“One, because I might be able to use your unique talents to figure this thing out. And two, I don’t want you leaving my sight until we figure out why the feds are looking for you.”

I didn’t want the feds getting their hands on me either. Drew and I had discussed at length what would happen if the government found out about what I could do. Sitting in a white room with electrodes sticking out of my head didn’t sound like fun.

“How can I help you solve this? The murderer just shot himself on live TV.”

Ever since I'd come back to the city with Drew, he would occasionally call me down to the station to help him out with suspects. If he had a feeling that someone had committed a crime, but he couldn't get them to confess, he would have me come in and give their mind a quick scan.

Needless to say, since I'd started doing that, Drew's arrest and conviction rate had gone through the roof. Not only could I tell if they'd done it, but I could give Drew all the details of the crime. I could name accomplices, locations of murder weapons, passwords to computers, and anything else that could lead to solid evidence for their prosecution.

At the rate we were going, Drew would be the police commissioner by the time he was thirty-five.

And to be honest, it helped give my life a little purpose. I was doing something useful for a change. I'd also helped get several innocent people set free. Some of the detectives working with Drew hated him because he would screw their cases up.

Sometimes they would get fixated on a suspect, and I would come in and tell Drew that it wasn't him. He couldn't tell his colleagues how he knew they were innocent, only that they definitely were. Contradicting senior detectives normally wasn't good for your career, but Drew's record spoke for itself.

In this case, I didn't think I could provide much help. Judging from the blood covering Senator McArthur, he was the one who'd killed his family.

And that dude just shot himself.

Case closed.

Drew glared at me. "We don't have time to argue right now. The whole country is going to lose their fucking minds over this McArthur thing. Now come on."

"While I appreciate that you think I need a babysitter, I'm pretty sure that I can manage by myself." I put some shoes on. They were a size and half too small and they made my toes angle into each other, but I made do. "Besides, I need to get some food. These muscles won't feed themselves."

I followed him into the hallway, not bothering to lock the door behind us. If someone wanted my dirty undies, they could have them. One positive thing about being poor as dirt was that you didn't have to worry about someone stealing your stuff.

"Seriously, Ash, I could use some help getting this sorted ASAP. The pressure to figure out what happened to the senator is going to be out of control."

We descended all three flights of stairs in a hurry, half-racing by the time we got to the bottom.

I held two fingers to my temples and pretended to focus, squeezing my eyes shut. “I think I’m seeing something... yes! The senator did it.”

“You’re such an ass.” Drew pushed through the broken front door of my apartment building and stepped into the street. It hadn’t worked since I’d moved in. Hell, I’d never even seen the landlord.

That didn’t stop the bastard from cashing my rent checks though.

“The senator shot himself, and his family is already dead. What do you want me to do? I can hear people’s thoughts, not talk to ghosts.”

The humidity enveloped us as we moved to the sidewalk. Waves of heat baked off the concrete, making me sweat in a matter of seconds. The reflection from the windshield of a black SUV across the street forced me to squint as I took in the dilapidated neighborhood.

“And what about the—?” Drew cut himself off, his eyes growing wide as he peered over my shoulder.

I turned around and followed his gaze down the sidewalk.

Sammy, the woman from the bank robbery, walked toward us, a big grin on her face. She waved at me. “Hey, you.”

She wore a tight t-shirt that showed off her rather large assets. My eyes gravitated toward them again. I had to fight to focus on her face. She wore tiny shorts and low heels. A purse draped over her shoulder.

I was a big fan of her wardrobe.

“Hey there, Sammy. What are you doing here?” I glanced back at Drew and lowered my voice. “And you were telling me I shouldn’t have gone into that bank. I love the spoils of war.”

“What good are those going to do you with that cartoon shirt you’re wearing? And you smell like a toilet at a bar,” Drew whispered back. He puffed his chest out as she approached.

“I’m looking for you. My hero ran off before I could talk to him.” She gave me a big hug before releasing me and looking at Drew. “Nice to see you again, Detective.”

“You too, Ms. Moore.”

“You two know each other?” I could have searched the answer out in her head, but I didn’t like to invade people’s privacy if I could help it. In the evenings, when fatigue settled in from a long day of constantly barricading my mental defenses, I couldn’t help it. But in the mornings, I tried to behave myself.

Besides, the amount of awful shit you saw inside the head of even the nicest person could really screw you up. Everyone had thoughts that they weren’t proud of or wanted to keep private.

There was a reason for that.

People were fucked up.

"We met at the station last night." Drew's shaved head reddened as he appraised her.

"He was very nice."

I nodded at Drew's car. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Hunh? Oh, yeah." He looked from me to Sammy and back again. "I really think you should come with me."

"Bye, bye. Have fun at work." I turned back to Samantha. "I didn't expect to see you again."

Drew mumbled to himself as he walked around to the driver's side. He gave us a baleful look before plopping into the seat.

Sammy beamed up at me. Though she was tall for a woman, probably close to six feet, she still had to look up. "I thought you had to live around here if you were walking down the street with a case of beer. So I've been looking around for you."

"You've been walking around the block, hoping to see me?"

Drew peeled out, a flashing light stuck on his dash. He thought, *No way can you get her number.*

"Yup!" She bounced a little as she spoke to me.

I appreciated it very much.

"You never told me your name. I couldn't let my hero go nameless."

"Asher Benson. Call me Ash." I stuck my hand out, but she brushed it aside and gave me another hug.

I *really* appreciated that.

"Thank you so much, Ash. What you did was so brave. I still can't believe it."

"Yeah, well." I wasn't really sure what to say to that, so I just kept hugging her back. She smelled so good.

And that made me realize that I hadn't showered since yesterday morning. There had been weight lifting, jiu-jitsu class, and copious amounts of shitty beer since that time. I let her go and took a step back, creating a buffer zone between us.

I half expected to see flies buzzing around me.

Sammy's smile faded a bit as she looked from my wrinkled, ridiculous shirt to my rundown apartment building. "Is this where you live?"

"Unfortunately."

Why couldn't I have met this girl at the gym? At least my obnoxious shirt would fit in there. I would probably smell better too. And now she saw the dump I lived in. That was a trifecta of crap I hadn't really wanted to land in.

“It’s nice.” Her face flushed slightly as she looked back at me. “When I saw you yesterday, I thought you might have been homeless.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, you were drinking a beer when you walked in the door. The only people I ever see drinking in the streets are homeless.”

Holy shit. I sucked. A beautiful woman, whose life I saved yesterday, thought I looked homeless. Awesome.

I laughed that off as if it were no big deal. “I’m not homeless, just had a bad run of luck.”

“Can I buy you a coffee or something?” Sammy shuffled her feet and looked down at them.

“That would be great. There’s a bagel shop down the road—want to go there?”

Sammy’s eyes locked onto mine, and I could’ve sworn I saw a twinkle in them. Against all odds, I felt confident that she was into me. Maybe I should have run into dangerous situations more often.

The coffee shop was small, but cozy. I’d never been inside it before because my budget didn’t allow for little things like food or flavored beverages without alcohol in them. We each grabbed a small coffee and sat at a table in the back corner.

The smell of baked goods made my stomach rumble.

“So you’re an alcoholic?” Sammy blurted out twenty seconds after we sat down.

I choked on my coffee, spraying drops of it on the table. Very sexy. Maybe I should’ve just farted and really shown how pathetic I was at talking to women.

Sammy frowned. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t very nice.”

“No, it’s fine. I did walk into a bank while pounding beers. I wouldn’t say that I have a drinking problem in the traditional sense. The alcohol helps me cope with certain, uh, issues.”

I wanted to smack myself in the forehead. That was the *definition* of being an alcoholic. Telling a beautiful woman that I needed booze to cope with life’s problems wasn’t the best way to keep her interest piqued. I was striking out left and right.

“I understand.” Sammy nodded and looked down at her coffee, clearly uncomfortable.

“No, it’s not like that,” I said. “I’m a vet and—” I cut myself off when I saw a black SUV parked across the street. I could only see the back end of it, but it appeared to be remarkably similar to the one I’d spotted outside of my apartment building.



“Ash?” Sammy asked. She followed my gaze for a moment before turning back to me. “What is it?”

I shook my head, focusing my attention back on her. There were probably a thousand black SUVs driving around the city at any given point. “Nothing. Anyway, what do you do?”

I wanted to get off the topic of my drinking. It was hard to explain to people why I needed to imbibe so much without telling them about my affliction.

“Nothing special. I work in a doctor’s office, dealing with insurance companies and patients.”

“Sounds horribly boring.”

“It is.”

I resisted the urge to look at her breasts again. The damn things were like magic. They were sapping my willpower like a Dementor from Harry Potter. “Do you live nearby? You’re way too pretty to hang around a dump like this neighborhood.”

She blushed again.

I liked that I could do that to her.

“You’re sweet. My apartment is a few blocks down the street, just off Pratt. It’s not far away, but the area doesn’t feel as... rundown.”

“This place blows. I don’t live here because I want to.”

The barista behind the counter looked over at us, glowering at me.

I shrugged. “Sorry, but it sucks here.”

Certain parts of Baltimore were little more than warzones. If you drove through almost any section of the city, you’d go from being perfectly safe to speeding through red lights so you didn’t get carjacked. It was odd to see the disparities in wealth and status from block to block.

“So you were a soldier?” Sammy tilted her head as she talked to me. It was a look of concern that I’d become accustomed to since my discharge.

“Yup. Did two tours in the Middle East—one each in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

“When did you get out?”

“About five years ago.” I tapped on my temple. “A terrorist with an IED decided that I’d spent enough time serving my country.”

Sammy reached out and put her hand on top of mine.

Electric shocks ran through my skin. It had been so long since I’d felt a soft, gentle touch like that. I had to fight against a shudder of ecstasy.

“It’s so awful what you guys have to go through.” Sammy let the touch linger for a few seconds before retracting her hand. “Is that why you drink?”

I shrugged, but didn’t say anything. I understood then that she’d come to find me so that she could help me in some way. She thought I was a homeless

alcoholic, who walked around smelling like a urinal. It was thoughtful, but I didn't need any help.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't pry," she said.

"It's OK."

"I do have one more question, if you don't mind?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"How did you know my name in the bank last night?"

Shit. I should have seen that question coming, but I was too mesmerized by boobs. "I'm a good guesser." I looked at my wrist, which didn't have a watch on it. "Look at the time. I should get back to my hole in the wall and take a shower."

I coaxed her toward the door as she kept at it.

"How could you guess that? I'm not sure I'm buying what you're selling, Ash." She touched my arm.

I thought I might die right there. What was it about this woman that was driving me so crazy? Was it merely how long it had been since the last time I got laid?

The vehicle across the street caught my eye again as we stepped outside. It was definitely the same one. Something felt off about it.

We went to the right, heading back in the direction of my apartment.

"Are you all right? You seem a little jumpy." Sammy took a few quick steps to catch up to me.

"I'm fine. Guess I'm still on edge from last night," I lied.

She kept giving me quick glances, worry lines etched between her eyes.

"What?" I asked after the third concerned look she gave me.

"Can I help you at all? I get the feeling you've had a run of bad luck. I mean, I already know how great of a guy you are. You ran into a bank to stop a robbery. But you have a sadness in your eyes."

I inspected her face, searching for any signs of pity. That was the one thing I couldn't stand. I didn't take charity, and I didn't want pity. I didn't see either in her eyes.

"Can I call you some time?" I decided to go for it, although I used the worst line possible. I didn't have a phone, so calling her would be an issue. There was no way I could use Drew's because his girlfriend would go nuclear if she saw another woman's number on his phone.

A broad grin lit up her face. Dimples appeared on each side of her smile, making her even cuter. "I would really like that."

I had a strong urge to dance in the middle of the sidewalk. I should have gone down in the record books for securing a date with such an attractive woman

while looking and smelling like hell. Someone needed to call Guinness.

The SUV rolled down the street toward us, moving slowly.

My jaw set as I watched it over my shoulder. Whoever sat behind the wheel was following me.

I lowered my mental barriers and let my mind wander out. My thoughts stretched toward the vehicle, probing the consciousness of the driver.

Three people were in there. I felt their presence, but I couldn't grab onto their thoughts as I always did.

It was as if my ability had run into a brick wall in their heads.

A void filled the space where their memories, thoughts, and emotions should have been. I felt them, but couldn't interact.

That scared me more than anything else did at that moment. Since the first echo had pinged around inside of my head, I hadn't encountered a single person I couldn't read.

Now there were three people following me who I couldn't engage with. What did that mean? Who were they? How were they blocking me?

I picked up my pace, taking long strides.

Sammy struggled to keep up. "What's the rush?"

"Don't look back, but someone is following me."

She started to turn around when I grabbed her arm, pulling her forward.

"Just keep walking."

"But why would someone follow us?"

"They're following me, not you. Do you have a cell phone?"

"Yeah, why?" She pulled her purse from her shoulder and dug through it.

"Call Drew and tell him that the feds found me. He'll understand what that means. Tell him to find me." I recited his number and made her repeat it back to me. "Now keep walking. I'm going to see what these assholes want."

Sammy dialed Drew's number. "I don't understand what's going on, Ash."

"I don't either, but I know that you shouldn't be here to find out." I stopped walking and nodded down the sidewalk. "Keep going."

I turned around in time to see the SUV stop at the curb.

Sammy continued walking with the phone held up to her ear. She kept glancing over her shoulder.

One of the rear doors of the vehicle opened.

A man in a gray suit stepped out. He wore dark sunglasses and had a short, tight haircut. His posture and square, set jaw oozed confidence.

The other doors opened, and two more men stepped out. They were similarly dressed, though the man in the front passenger seat wore a black suit. He was taller and slightly more muscular than the others were.

He had a thousand-yard stare that only came from guys who'd seen some serious shit. The expressionless, distant gaze was something I'd seen before. When you spent enough time overseas, you would occasionally run into men like this. They were Special Forces or spooks of some kind.

They would land in a small helicopter, talk to the base commander, and then disappear again. No one ever knew who they were or what they were doing.

These guys had that look.

"You need to come with us, Lieutenant," the man in black said.

## 6 - Feds “R” Us

The three men stood five feet before me.

Definitely feds.

“Let me guess—you’re doing some work for my neighbors, and you wanted to offer me a discount on new windows and roofing.” My eyes cut down the sidewalk to Sammy.

She stood at the end of the block, watching us as she talked into the phone. I could only hope she’d gotten through to Drew.

The man in black stared at me, expressionless. “Get in the car, Lieutenant.”

“My mom told me not to get in cars with strangers.”

The men on either side of him stepped closer, flanking me.

“Let me see some badges, boys,” I said. “And if you come one step closer, you’re going to have a really bad day.”

Black Suit flashed an ID with a bunch of letters on it that I didn’t recognize. It looked like some kind of DHS badge, but I couldn’t be sure. I hadn’t been in the know for five years.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Get in the vehicle, Lieutenant.”

I pointed at my t-shirt. “Does it look like I’m still a lieutenant to you?”

“Grab him,” Black Suit said.

The guy on my left took another step closer.

Big mistake.

I kicked him square in the balls.

Everyone always underestimated the kick to the groin. I liked to call that the Asher Benson Special Delivery. I didn’t care how tough you were—a kick to the boys would put you down.

He crashed to the sidewalk in a blubbering heap. His sunglasses flew off, clattering into a nearby gutter.

“Told you not to come any closer.”

The second guy came forward, and I introduced his nose to my fist. I wasn’t the best boxer in the gym, but I did have a quick jab. He stumbled a half step, his

face twisting in anger.

He bull rushed me, tackling me at the waist as I tried to twist free. My back slammed against the concrete, jarring the air from my lungs. He landed on top of me, trying to hold me down.

Another mistake.

My boxing was decent, but my jiu-jitsu was nasty.

I shifted my hips, intent on slapping an arm bar on him and bending his elbow the wrong direction.

Black Suit grabbed my wrist and wrenched my arm down to the sidewalk. He jammed a needle into my shoulder, shooting me up with a semi-clear liquid. The needle was wide, long, and didn't feel like a little pinch when it went in.

"What the hell!" Warmth ran into my neck. My thoughts went fuzzy within seconds.

They hauled me to my feet. I wanted to fight back, but my brain didn't seem to want to communicate with my muscles.

"Relax, Lieutenant." Black Suit helped drag me to the SUV. "This is just a precaution."

"You just drugged me?" It came out as a question, though I intended it as a statement.

They were abducting me in broad daylight. These guys clearly weren't concerned with the consequences of kidnapping a civilian in the middle of the street.

"Christ, he stinks," one of them said.

They threw me in the back of the vehicle. Tan leather seats felt great in contrast to the heat baking off everything outside. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

The man I kicked got up, cradling his groin, and staggered toward the SUV.

We spun away from the curb and accelerated through the next intersection. Sammy shouted something at us as we drove by her, but my addled brain couldn't make it out.

My vision blurred and spun. I couldn't focus. Everything felt loose and disjointed.

"Son of a bitch kicked me right in the dick," the man beside me said through gritted teeth. "What kind of a sissy move is that?"

"He got the drop on you, didn't he?" Black Suit asked.

Drool fell from my lower lip as I leaned against my door. I wanted to grab the handle and pull it open, but we were already going eighty miles per hour down the highway by the time my hand decided to do what I wanted.

How long we drove, I didn't know. Time compressed as I fought against the drug coursing through my system.

I thought we drove onto a government installation of some kind. There were lots of nondescript buildings and vehicles, but I didn't see any uniforms or insignias anywhere.

The vehicle stopped in front of an unmarked office building. They dragged me out of the backseat and through a side door. My feet were working again, but I let them have all of my weight. Why make it easier for them?

Long hallways and closed offices passed by on either side as they took me deeper inside.

They dumped me into an interrogation room with a large mirror on one of the walls. A table sat in the middle with two chairs on either side.

I dragged myself onto one of them.

A pitcher of water with two glasses sat on the stainless steel tabletop.

My hands still shook a bit as I poured myself a glass. The physical effects of the drug were finally starting to wear off, but I had a bad case of the shakes. I still couldn't focus my mind either.

The water helped a little.

I sat there for a while, wondering what would happen next. Was someone watching me from the other side of that mirror? I assumed so.

The lone door to the room opened eventually, and a tall man of maybe fifty entered.

He didn't walk, he strode, as if he wanted everyone who saw him to know he was the boss.

"How long did you practice that ridiculous gait?" I asked. I was surprised that the words came out as clear as they did.

The man held a manila folder in one hand. He dropped it to the table and sat down, keeping his hardened gaze trained on me. Like the others, he wore a suit, though it was disheveled, the tie undone. A thin, dark scar ran down his right cheek.

"You can call me Smith," he said.

"Smith? That's the best fake name you could come up with?"

"I apologize for the way you were brought in here, but time is of the essence."

"Your gorillas kidnapped and drugged me."

Smith continued to stare at me. "They told me that you gave them a few issues."

"One of them will be pissing blood for a few days."

"Those are some of my best men."

I returned his glare.

Smith opened the folder. "You probably have a lot of questions."

I stayed quiet, waiting. Now that the worst effects of the drug had abated, my mind was clearing a bit and an understanding of my predicament set in. I'd been kidnapped off the street, drugged, and thrown in an interrogation room.

That was the kind of shit done to people in the middle of a war, not in downtown Baltimore.

"We know that you're a telepath," Smith said. "The drug administered to you inhibits your ability to read our minds. Unfortunately, we haven't been able to eliminate the other effects, but we've managed to minimize them. You'll have full use of your faculties soon, minus the ability to dig around in our heads. That won't come back for a few more hours."

The realization of my worst nightmare was playing out right in front of me. The government had me, and they knew what I could do.

Smith asked, "Were you able to see into the minds of my men earlier?"

"No." I decided to play it straight. For now.

Smith nodded as if that made sense. "The woman you were with, Samantha Moore, does she know about your telepathy?"

"No."

"Good. That keeps things simple. We would hate to involve her in this."

"Stay away from her, asshole. I don't even know who she is. We just met yesterday." I fought to contain my anger. I didn't deserve to be here, locked up and drugged, let alone Sammy.

"Relax, Lieutenant—"

"And stop fucking calling me that."

"Fine, Mr. Benson." Smith's expression remained stoic, despite my antagonism. The guy was a rock. "You met Ms. Moore in the bank yesterday, correct?"

I gave him a minute nod.

"Obviously, we've seen the footage of the robbery. You knew a lot of information about a man that you had never met before. That's how we learned about you."

"No shit."

"Your military file says you could have made captain had it not been for your smart-ass attitude."

"What smart-ass attitude?"

No facial reaction from him at all. "Do you find yourself funny, Mr. Benson?"

"I did, but you've convinced me otherwise."



He held my gaze for several seconds before looking back to the files. “You were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross during Operation Iraqi Freedom. You left a covered position to drag a wounded soldier to safety while under sniper fire.”

I clenched my jaw. The last thing I wanted was to discuss that day with this jerkhole. “He died anyway. I didn’t deserve the medal.”

“And you have a Purple Heart for suffering a traumatic brain injury during an IED attack.” He leaned forward. “How long after that did you start to hear voices?”

“How the hell do you know so much about this?”

“Do you really think of yourself as so unique? Do you truly believe that no one else has ever dealt with your situation?”

“Wait a second.” I eased back, studying his face, looking for any signs of deception. Not that I could have seen them anyway. His features might as well have been chiseled out of marble. “Are you telling me that there are other people who can hear thoughts too?”

“Of course.”

My mouth fell open. I’d felt so isolated, so alone for the past half a decade, that I didn’t know how to process what he told me. Then again, the drug was still doing a tap dance in my head.

“We have eight others—” Smith stopped himself for a second. “—*had* eight others working for us.”

It was difficult not to notice his use of the past tense.

“*Eight?*”

“Correct. The facility you’re in right now is called The Psych Ward.” His eye twitched. “I hate that name.”

I almost fell out of my chair. If I’d found someone else like me when I first heard the echoes, then I might not have lost years of my life in an extended, drunken binge. Maybe I wouldn’t be sitting in an interrogation room reeking of beer and sweat.

A few sounds sputtered out of my mouth, but they didn’t form a coherent sentence. That was a shame because I really wanted to throw in a couple of digs about The Psych Ward. What moron had come up with that?

Smith said, “Unfortunately, none of the other telepaths are stateside right now, so you can’t meet them.” He looked at the files again. “You fell off the grid for the better part of five years after your discharge. Debit receipts show that you’ve been drinking. A lot. That’s typical for those with your talents.”

I sat there, thunderstruck.

“It is fascinating though, that you developed telepathy from a brain injury. You’re the first case of that we’ve heard of.”

“Really?” I finally managed to squeak out.

“A few were born with it. Others developed it during puberty. You’re the only person who has gained the ability during adulthood. That would explain your difficulty adjusting.”

I held a hand up. “How about we start from the top? Why in the hell did you abduct me? Am I a prisoner now? Why?”

“You’re not a prisoner—at least not in the traditional sense.”

“So I can go then?”

“No.”

I grunted. Fucking government. This guy could run for office with his way of twisting words and logic around to fit his needs.

Smith continued, “You were brought here because we need your help. Not only that, but we’re afraid that you’re the *only* person who can help us, as cliché as that sounds.”

“You want my help, so you figured the best way to get it was to drug and kidnap me? Brilliant. You’ve never heard of asking? Maybe shoot me an email?”

“We couldn’t risk leaving you in the open. Your life was quite possibly in danger the longer you remained on the streets.”

“What? Why?”

Smith, or whatever the hell his name was, kept feeding me riddles. I’d been around enough classified briefings to know when someone was dancing around, trying to give as little information as possible. Scarface was doing a hell of a jig.

Instead of answering my questions, Smith shifted gears again. “You’ve been attending boxing and martial arts classes for the past six months or so. How much of an affect has that had on your ability to control your mind?”

“Stop avoiding my questions.”

“Mr. Benson, I need you to be open and honest with me.”

“This is a two-way street. If you want information from me, then you need to give some back.”

Smith cracked his knuckles. They were gnarled and lined with scars. He’d spent his share of time hitting bags in the gym. “I will answer as much as I can, but first I need to get an understanding of where you are in regards to your telepathy. If we’re to move forward, then I must know how developed you are.”

Again, he spoke in a code that I could only partially decipher. I decided to ride it out a little longer and see where the road took me. He already assumed that I would help him, even though I didn’t even know what we were talking about.

He had me curious.

“The boxing helps me with learning to control it. The footwork, technique, and timing taught me to mute certain voices while letting others through. It’s more of an offensive feel, if that makes sense. It’s the best I can explain it.”

Smith nodded. “Continue.”

“The jiu-jitsu is for conditioning more than anything else. Being in shape helps me keep my defenses up longer. I’m still drinking at night though, as I get tired.”

“Excellent. We’ve also observed a direct correlation between physical endurance and mental strength.”

“Your turn. Why am I here? And don’t give me that shit about my life being in danger unless you’re going to tell me why.”

Smith pulled a file out of the folder, flipped it around, and slid it across the desk. It was a photo of Senator McArthur.

“You’ve heard about the happenings at the Capitol building this morning?” Smith asked.

“Of course. What the hell does that have to do with me?”

He pulled another photo out and handed it over.

It was a long shot of the press conference right after the Senator had shot himself. His body was sprawled across the top of the stairs, partially obscured from view by the podium.

Reporters and spectators were blurry as they fled in every direction.

One man stood in the middle of the crowd, his features unaffected because he wasn’t moving at all. Chin-length hair dangled above a cheap, off-the-rack suit. He had tanned skin and dark features that obscured his ethnicity.

Cold, calculating eyes stared directly into the camera.

“This man’s name is Murdock, and he was the face of modern espionage.”

I studied the picture. “Was?”

“As of this morning, he’s now the face of domestic terrorism.”

## 7 - Info Dump

“Murdock is the most powerful telepath in the world.”

I held a hand up. “Care to explain what the hell you just said? Espionage? Terrorism?”

“Murdock was a covert agent operating in Afghanistan. He disappeared three months ago. Because we were unable to ascertain his whereabouts or status, we assumed him to be dead.”

“Dead? If he was a spy, wouldn’t it be just as likely that he’d been discovered and captured?”

“A man of Murdock’s unique talents is difficult to capture and hold.”

More code.

“You’re using telepaths as covert agents?”

“Correct.”

The implications of what Smith revealed had me reeling again.

A government with a group of mind readers at its disposal would have an incredible amount of power. The practical uses were limitless.

How many terrorist attacks could be thwarted? How many plots foiled?

Having a telepath scanning the minds of suspected terrorists would reveal untold volumes of information. Entire networks of insurgents and Al-Qaeda would crumble. IED locations could be discovered before they were detonated.

We would know what the Iranians and Chinese were doing at all times.

The possibilities for peace and prosperity had no bounds when you knew the objectives and desires of your enemies. And your allies, for that matter.

The capacity for abuses of that power were troubling.

Someone who could read minds could sway the stock markets with a single, massive trade. Presidential candidates could be blackmailed out of, or into, races. CEOs would have their best-laid business plans destroyed because a telepath hired by a competitor passed him on the street.

What did Spider-Man’s uncle tell him? Something about power and responsibility.

It had been my experience that those in power were more concerned with lining their own pockets than taking responsible action.

And now Smith was telling me that one of these telepathic power brokers had disappeared. That didn't sound too promising.

"So you figured this guy had kicked the bucket, yet he's standing in the middle of Washington D.C. watching a senator shoot himself."

"He murdered the senator and his family."

"Murdered? The senator committed suicide."

"Murdock is more than just a telepath. He also has the power of suggestion. Strong suggestion."

My stomach constricted. "Are you telling me that he can control someone's mind?"

"Yes."

"Bullshit." I dismissed him with a wave.

"Is that not the same response you would get from someone if you told them that you could hear their thoughts?"

He had a point. What he was saying though, went far beyond anything I could do. We were out there in science-fiction land.

"Mind control. What about telekinesis? Remote viewing?"

Smith frowned. "None of that is possible, as far as we know. Murdock is the only one who can even manipulate thoughts. We've never encountered anyone more powerful."

I stood from my chair and walked over to the one-way mirror. Who watched from the other side? What was the end game here? Smith was dropping bomb after bomb on me, but I had yet to hear why. If he was telling me all of these things, what was he holding back?

The fact that he would spill such highly classified information on me raised even more concerns. The operation he ran was far above your typical top-secret classification. He shouldn't have told me any of it.

I stared into the mirror. "Assuming you aren't lying, why would a spy of yours pop up in D.C. and kill a no-name senator?"

"McArthur sat on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. He provided our funding. Besides President Thomas, he was the only politician who knew about us."

"That doesn't answer my question." I went back to my seat.

"We believe Murdock is seeking retribution. All of our agents operate under the knowledge that we will disavow all affiliation with them if they're captured."

"So he was working for you, they caught him, and you left him to die? Now he's escaped and coming for you."

“That’s an oversimplification of a complex situation, but yes.”

I paused for a few seconds, holding his gaze. “You still haven’t told me why I’m here. You want me to help you, but in what way?”

“We need you to help us locate Murdock.”

“What? How?”

Smith turned toward the mirror and nodded at it before focusing on me again. “Telepaths are able to detect one another when they’re within a few hundred yards of each other. We call it The Bridge. You’ll feel his presence, his mind, when you get close enough. You’ll be able to communicate with each other without uttering a word.”

“I’ll be able to hear his thoughts, and he can hear mine?” I felt as if I’d done nothing but ask questions since he walked through the door.

“Yes, if you choose to. He won’t have access to your thoughts unless you allow it. If the Bridge forms a pathway between your minds, then your mental defenses are akin to a tollbooth. You allow access when you choose.” He closed the folder. “All we need is for you to get close enough to inform us if Murdock is in the vicinity. After you’ve confirmed his presence, we’ll take over.”

“And why should I help you? He killed an asshole who left him to die in the middle of the sandbox. I’ve been there. I don’t blame him for being pissed.”

“Murdock didn’t just kill the senator. He made McArthur murder his own family.”

A sigh slipped from my lips. He had a point.

Smith continued, “Murdock is just getting started. He’s a sociopath. We were able to aim him, to use his tools to our advantage. Now that he’s gone rogue, he presents a clear danger to our entire system. He could topple everything.”

I wasn’t sure that would be a bad thing.

To say that I had no love for our government would be an understatement of biblical proportions. Having a bunch of sadistic, self-righteous assholes running for their lives didn’t sound too bad to me.

Guilt still had a stranglehold on me too.

I’d joined the military because of the events in September of 2001. I’d wanted to make a difference, to fight terrorism, and to avenge the deaths of the innocent lives lost in New York that day.

Instead, I searched homes in a country that had no bearing on 9/11.

They forced me to kick in doors and confiscate guns. I ran checkpoints on meaningless roads that did nothing to ferret out the bad guys. We executed inconsequential missions because our command had a certain number of raids they had to perform per month.

I watched two good men die because we had to search an empty house.

Barker's blood still covered my hands.

My guilt.

Could I blame a disillusioned spy for wanting revenge?

Did I *want* to stop him?

Smith squinted at me. "McArthur's girls did nothing to deserve their murders. Their birth to a senator should not have sealed their fates. Our job is to protect innocent lives, not stand around while they're snuffed out. You believed in that once."

He'd done his research on me. Smith knew how to pull my strings.

Three heavy knocks pounded against the metal door.

"What?" Smith asked.

The door opened, and the man who'd jammed a needle into my shoulder stepped inside. We locked eyes for a second before he turned to Smith. The son of a bitch smirked at me.

"Sir, we've located Murdock."

Smith stood, his hard eyes softening for a moment. "What? Where?"

"A retinal scan just matched his in the DC3 building. He's somewhere inside right now."

"He's *in* the building?" The incredulous look on Smith's face almost made me laugh.

The man's face tightened. "He's gained access to the upper floor."

"Jesus Christ." Smith looked at me and motioned with his hand. "It appears that your services may not be required, Mr. Benson. Follow me while we figure this thing out. If we're able to apprehend him right now, I'll send you on your way."

I got up and followed them out of the interrogation room.

We walked down a long, bare hallway, hanging a left at an intersection. No one else roamed the halls. The walls were white and plain, giving away nothing about the building or the operation inside of it.

After passing through a door on the right, we entered a large room with banks of monitors covering one wall. Two men sat before them, manipulating keyboards and mice. Security camera footage played on the three largest screens.

They were the other two jerkwads who helped kidnap me. I waved at the one I'd kicked in the crotch. "How's the twig and giggleberries?"

"Fuck you." His face reddened and he spun around, looking as if he was going to stand up out of his chair.

I hoped he would. We had unfinished business.

"Where is he?" Smith asked, impatience coloring his words.

“He’s going up the elevator right now.” The man turned back to the monitors, his sour expression giving me great pleasure.

“I trust you’ve warned our team?”

“Yes, sir. We’ve dispatched agents, but the beltway is congested with an overturned eighteen-wheeler. They aren’t going to make it in time.”

“What about a helicopter? Christ, Mills, we can’t leave them defenseless over there. They’re computer techs—they can’t handle Murdock.”

“They’re cycling up the bird now, sir, but it doesn’t look good.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. “What’s DC3?”

“The Cyber Crimes Center,” Smith said. “We have the upper floor of the building. It’s used to crack intel and equipment provided by our agents.”

One of the monitors changed over to the inside of an elevator. A bald man north of sixty stared directly into the camera.

I leaned closer to the monitor, inspecting the video. “That’s not the same guy you just showed me a picture of.”

“Murdock is a spy.” Smith stepped behind one of the men. “He can disguise himself with ease.”

What had I gotten myself into here? Disguises, spies, and telepaths. Insanity.

“What about the guards stationed there?” Smith asked.

One of the men punched away at his keyboard, and a new video feed appeared on the big monitor. Two bodies sprawled across a sidewalk. Pools of congealing blood encircled them.

The video feed changed back to the man in the elevator.

He winked at the camera.

Smith turned to me. “This, Mr. Benson, is why we need your help. You’re about to witness the murder of at least a dozen innocent people.”

I forced my eyes back to the monitor.



## 8 - Short Flight

The lens of the camera mounted in the corner of the elevator shifted.

They were watching.

Good. Murdock wanted them to witness the severing of their digital arm. Without their forensic team, he would have an easier time drawing Smith out. Their panic to find him would force them into mistakes.

Murdock winked at the camera.

The elevator dinged as it reached the top floor.

The doors opened.

He stepped out and stood before a large room. Cubicles connected the walls, creating a maze of technical experts and computer geeks. Cables crisscrossed the floors, spider webbing the room in a tapestry of connections.

Though Murdock had never been there before, he knew that they once shared a mission. He slaved in the field for data and intel—they made sense of the pieces he sent back.

Now they would serve another purpose—as martyrs. Their deaths, along with McArthur's, would be the catalysts of change that Murdock yearned for. The world would know of his existence, of his power, and they would squirm under that knowledge. He alone would bring the winds of change.

He adjusted the collar of his button-up shirt and stepped forward. The bald cap he wore tugged at his forehead as he craned his neck to look over the top of the nearest cubicle.

An emaciated young man with drawn-out eyes and pale, sallown skin looked back at him. A hard drive rested on the desk before him, its innards strewn across a static-free mat.

The young man's forehead wrinkled. "You can't be in here, sir."

"And yet, here I am."

Murdock reached out with his mind, worming his way into the man's consciousness.

*How the hell did this geezer get in here?*

Murdock smiled at the thought. "Hello there, Adam Duplessie."

“Do I know you?”

“No, but I know *everything* about you.”

“I, uh, don’t know what your deal is, or how you know my name, but this is a classified area.” His eyes narrowed. “How did you even get up here? Did someone bring you up?” He stood from his chair and looked over the top of the cubicle.

“Someone gave me their security code.”

*Is this guy high, or just senile as shit?*

Murdock’s grin slid from his face. “I’m here to end your pain.”

“You are one creepy old man.” Adam reached for a phone sitting beside a panel of three monitors on his desk. “I’m calling security.”

Murdock clenched down on Adam’s mind, wrapping his own around it like a thousand invisible tentacles.

Adam froze in place, his fingers inches from the phone.

“The security guards won’t answer, I’m afraid,” Murdock said. “Their bodies are cooling on the sidewalk.”

Though Adam’s head didn’t move, his eyes roamed around wildly in their sockets. Murdock enjoyed giving people the freedom to look at their surroundings even as he froze their limbs in place.

It upped their panic.

*Oh God! What’s happening to me?*

“My name is Murdock. I know that is familiar to you. I can hear it bouncing around in that pathetic little mind of yours. You fear me. You should.”

*Murdock? Oh Jesus!*

“Jesus won’t help you, Adam.”

Hysteria pulsed from his mind in waves, washing over Murdock.

Adam’s hand dropped to his side and his back straightened. He walked around his chair and stepped from his cubicle, stopping in front of Murdock. His eye twitched as he looked up at Murdock’s face.

“I’m here to release you, Adam. You’re lonely, so lonely, every single day when you leave here. You long for the emotional embrace of a mate that will never come. The idea that you will never be anything more than you are now haunts you. I will help you. I will make your life more valuable and memorable than you ever could.”

Adam turned around, his movements stilted and unnatural as he fought against Murdock’s commands. He walked down the center aisle of the room, desks, technicians, and computers flanking him on both sides.

Murdock followed. “This moment will live on in history. Your name and visage will forever be intertwined with the coming horrors I shall inflict upon

America. Your death is the accelerant that will spur the flame.”

Adam’s coworkers noticed his odd gait as he walked by. Their eyes focused on Murdock then, questioning expressions coming from all of them. They would be next.

*Please, don’t!*

“Don’t fear your fate, Adam. You’ve always wanted to be something more. I’m giving you that gift.”

They stopped at the far side of the building. Windows covered the majority of the wall, running from floor to ceiling. Together, they stood before the glass, peering down at the parking lots eight floors below them. Traffic slowly maneuvered along Nursery road, running perpendicular to the DC3 building.

“Remember when you were a child, and you wished you could fly? Let’s experiment, shall we?”

Adam’s fingers shook as he reached for a chair in an empty cubicle behind him. He grabbed the back and lifted it, cords standing out on his skinny arms from the weight of it.

“What are you doing, Adam?” A middle-aged man with a soft, rotund middle stood behind them. The rouge in his cheeks hinted at years of heavy drinking.

“Who is this man?”

Murdock turned back to him. “Wait your turn, Mr. Patterson.”

“Do I know you?” Patterson asked.

Two women came up behind him, confusion lines between their eyes.

“You know my work. My handle is Murdock.”

A flash of recognition and fear crossed his face. He gulped. “Murdock?”

Adam smashed the chair against the large window. The recoil nearly knocked him over. He swung again, the impact sending cracks splintering in every direction.

The sound brought a hushed silence to the room, the whir of computer fans audible above all else. Heads poked above the walls of random cubicles, ogling the scene at the end of the room.

Adam swung again.

“Stop!” One of the women stepped past Patterson, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her back. She asked, “What are you doing?”

“Everyone get out of here,” Patterson yelled. “Now!”

No one moved. Their confusion grew, clouding the ethereal air of the floor. Murdock lapped it up.

*Who is that guy?*

*Jesus! What is Adam doing?*

*What the hell is going on?*

Adam's next swing broke through the window, sending glass to the sidewalk below.

Wind blew in from the opening, ruffling his scruffy hair.

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"To infamy," Murdock said.

Adam leapt from the window.

The room erupted in chaos. Cowards fled for the elevator, pushing one another out of the way. Two women and a man ran toward the broken window, hoping to help in some way.

Murdock latched onto their minds and forced them to continue running. He released them in mid-fall and mentally reached for those standing before the closed elevator doors.

As his mind grew more powerful, Murdock was able to add to the number of people he could control simultaneously. During his escape, he'd managed to manipulate eight at once. The feat had left him exhausted and barely able to walk, but it had allowed him to turn his torturers into blubbery piles of ooze and flayed flesh.

He focused on four at a time for now, not needing to overextend himself.

The small group by the elevator rushed to their left, plowing head first into the nearest windows.

The glass flexed, but didn't break. Blotches of blood from the impact clung to them.

The people fell over, their faces masks of pain and ruin.

Patterson charged at Murdock.

The rotund man lowered his head, aiming for waist height.

Murdock forced his feet to tangle, sending him crashing into a computer cart. Monitors fell to the floor, their screens cracking.

Despair flowed from Patterson. He knew Murdock, thought he was dead. He understood what fate would befall all of them.

Something in Patterson's mind caught Murdock's attention. Things had changed since his capture in the mountains. Smith wasn't the man he'd once been. Murdock growled under his breath at the news, knowing that he'd have to change his plans.

Three more people leapt from the broken window.

The number of technicians still on the floor halved in fifteen seconds. More windows broke as they smashed their way through them.

The elevator dinged as it reached the floor.

Why? Patterson thought.

“The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Murdock knelt beside the supervisor as another man ran through the broken window, his feet still churning as he fell. “You are both a patriot and a servant of tyrants. Whether or not you believe your actions benign, I can assure you that they are not. Your death will serve as an example to others. The revolution has begun.”

Murdock stood, hiding a grimace that wanted to surface. During the active interrogations he’d endured, his first torturer had shattered his right foot with a hammer. They’d never set it, so prolonged periods of standing or walking caused him great discomfort.

They’d made him stand on it for hours at a time, laughing at his tears. He remembered the rusted claw hammer they’d used. The sickening crunch of his foot.

The blood.

*We analyze data. We don’t make policy decisions!*

“Ahh, yes. For thirty pieces of silver, you turned a blind eye to the consequences of your actions.”

Patterson pushed himself to his feet, blood trickling from a small cut on his right temple. He turned and marched toward the elevator, Murdock coming up behind him. The final two forensic analysts stepped from their hiding places behind their desks and fell in line beside their boss.

*You worked for the same people we did. How can you pretend otherwise?*

Murdock smirked while Patterson ran through possible scenarios where he might escape. The man’s fate was sealed, but he continued to fight against it.

“I have committed the same barbarism you have, that is true.” Murdock flipped through the man’s memories. “In fact, I’ve done much worse. But I’ve paid my dues. I’ve atoned by blood and fire.”

They stopped before the elevator. Patterson hit the button again, and the doors opened.

A camera stood in the corner of the room, just beside the entrance to the elevator. All four of them looked into the lens.

Murdock said, "Twinkle, twinkle, little Smithy, how I wonder where you are."

Patterson and his subordinates turned and sprinted across the room.

They never stopped running, even as they fell from the building.

Murdock stepped into the elevator, whistling a lullaby as the doors closed behind him.

## 9 - Deal with the Devil

I wanted to vomit.

During my time overseas, I'd seen a lot of death. Hell, I'd caused quite a bit of it.

*Never* had I seen a mass suicide. If I could even call what I'd just witnessed suicide. Those people were murdered, but by their own actions. It was a mind fuck that I couldn't quite get my head around.

"How far out is the response team?" Smith asked.

"Another five minutes," one of the stooges said.

"Then we've missed him." Smith turned back to me. "Do you understand now, Mr. Benson?"

"Understand? I just watched a bunch of people jump to their deaths. I'm about as far from understanding as you can get. What the hell is with the nursery rhymes? That's some creepy shit."

"We used those as a primitive code when our agents were in the field. Murdock made McArthur say that as a kind of calling card." Smith walked to the door, waving for me to follow him. "If we don't take Murdock into custody soon, he's going to wreak untold havoc on this country."

"I can see that. He's like a tornado in a trailer park." I stepped through the door and walked behind him.

"That's why we need your assistance. You can help us locate him. We'll take care of the rest."

"You drugged and kidnapped me and now you want my help? Somehow, you thought this would work out? And let's not pretend that you're just asking for a small favor here. You want me to run toward a guy who just wiped out an entire floor of people like it was nothing."

We walked down another blank hallway before stopping at a nondescript door. Smith turned back to me, his eyes boring into mine.

"You joined the military after the events of September Eleventh, ran into the line of fire to rescue a fallen soldier, and interjected yourself into a bank robbery to save lives. Despite your nonchalance and smart-ass comments, I know that

you care, Mr. Benson. You want to make a difference. You want to help. This is your chance.”

I hated that he had me pegged.

Everything he said was true. My motivations, though muddled and blurry from years of boozing, were pretty obvious. I couldn't stand around and watch bad things happen to good people. It would get me killed some day.

Maybe today.

The man in the black suit, he who liked to jam needles into me, appeared at the end of the hall. “Sir, we have a survivor.”

“What? Who?” Smith's eyes narrowed even further. They were little more than slits at that point.

“Nami Williams. She's a low-level analyst. Just hired a few months ago.”

“Debrief her.”

“She's already en route.” Needle Jabber disappeared around the corner again.

Before this was over, my fists were going to have a conversation with his face.

Smith glared at me again. “Are you willing to help us or not?”

The image of those people running through the windows flashed through my mind. Everything about Smith and his little operation bothered me. They weren't telling me everything. But how could I sit idly by while Murdock rampaged through the D.C. area like Godzilla?

“What do you need me to do?”

Smith smiled. It didn't suit his scarred face. Looked like it hurt.

He opened the door and stepped into a room filled with shelves and workbenches. Unrecognizable equipment and computers lined the walls, covering most of the surfaces. Despite the abundance of gear and whirring PCs, no one worked in the room. Boxes sat on the floor.

The entire building seemed empty. Were they just starting to set up shop there?

“We have a potential lead on where Murdock will be later today,” Smith said.

“If you know where he's going to be, why do you need me at all? Just shoot his ass when he shows up.”

“He'll sense our presence long before we could identify him. He would either kill my men or disappear again until the next slaughter. Our plan now is to get you close enough to form The Bridge, which will verify he's there, and then we'll come in and take him out.”

That sounded like an incredibly stupid plan to me. They were throwing me to the wolf and hoping he wouldn't bite.

Smith continued, "Because we don't know which direction he'll come from, we're going to have to stay at least a mile out."

"He'll tear me to shreds before you even get there."

"Once you confirm his whereabouts, all you have to do is walk away."

I didn't believe that for a second. In fact, I didn't believe much of what he said at all. Outside of this Murdock guy being able to make people kill themselves, I wasn't sure if there was a whole hell of a lot of truth to anything they'd told me.

Poking my head through the door, I looked down the long hallway again. The place didn't feel right to me.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"What?" Smith grabbed a few things from a shelf and stuffed them in his pockets.

"You're supposed to have this super-secret spy organization, but you seem to have all of three people working for you."

"I already told you—the telepaths under my command are out on various missions."

"What about the regular people like the band of action-star wannabes back there? You can't run an operation with a handful of people."

Smith sighed. "We keep things small to minimize the potential for leaks. Imagine what the American people would do if they found out that telepathy was real and that the government used them for espionage? What would the international community do?" He walked back to the door and led me into the hallway again. "Only three employees at DC3 knew where our intel came from. They processed information and evidence, but few had any idea about the telepaths."

That didn't sound right either. Everything the government did was huge and unwieldy. Even if something leaked, it wasn't like anyone would believe it. A bunch of mind readers that spied on terrorists?

Yeah, right.

"Bullshit. Where's everyone else?"

"Dead," Smith said after staring at me for several seconds. "Murdock killed the majority of my staff over the past few days. Those he didn't get to have gone into hiding." He handed me a small earpiece and a transmitter. "Put this in your ear. We'll be in contact the entire time you're in the open. Everything you say will come through to us."

"This is it? I don't get anything else? So much for being on the cutting edge of international espionage." I stuffed the equipment in my pocket. "I like how



you just glossed over the fact that your staff is dead. Afraid I would balk if I found out?”

Smith’s cell phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out and answered, turning away from me.

I took that moment to focus my mind on his. The drug continued to wear off, and I could feel things slowly clearing out in my head. I still didn’t have full use of my faculties, but I felt the presence of his thoughts nonetheless.

They were cloudy and immaterial, impossible for me to latch onto. Whether that was from the drug or his ability to block me out, I didn’t know.

As if he felt me probing around in his head, he turned back to me, eyes narrowing. He checked his watch. After several more seconds, he dropped his phone back in his pocket.

“The drug administered to you should be wearing off soon. How do you feel?”

“Nervous, untrusting, and pissed off.”

He nodded. “Our contact has confirmed that Murdock will be in place shortly. We have a driver ready for you.”

“Where are we going?”

“Mt. Olivet Cemetery outside of Washington.”

“I’m going after a terrorist in a cemetery?” I rubbed my temples. “What the hell kind of operation are you running here, Smithy?”

“An extremely hobbled one.”

Smith led me through more hallways until we arrived at the front of the building. We stopped in an empty lobby, our shoes echoing. The more I looked around, the less the place felt like a government, or military, facility.

It felt like a bag of lies.

I needed to get out of there and figure everything out. Get a hold of Drew.

“The driver outside will take you to the cemetery. We’ll be close behind, monitoring you by GPS and satellite feeds.” Smith fixed a hard gaze on me. I held it. “If you try to run or divulge anything I’ve told you to anyone, we’ll take you out. Understand?”

I shook my head. “So glad I’ve agreed to help.”

“Give us his location, and we’ll take over from there.” Smith nodded at the door. “The driver knows nothing, so don’t bother picking through his memories. Good luck, Mr. Benson.”

With my stomach twisted in uncertainty, I walked outside.

Another SUV waited for me by the curb, the engine idling. As I crossed the pavement, yet another pulled up behind it.

A small, black child climbed out of the backseat. She couldn't have been more than four feet tall. Her long hair was pulled into pigtails. A Powerpuff girls t-shirt and SpongeBob SquarePants backpack made up her outfit.

Her eyes were large and round as she took me in.

"Are you lost?" I asked her. What the hell was a little girl doing here?

"No, are you?"

"Ms. Williams, come inside please," Smith said from behind me.

I turned back to him. "What are you up to? Why are you bringing children here?"

"Children?" The little girl flipped me off. "I'm thirty, you asshole."

I looked from her to Smith and back again. I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. Telepaths, government officials, and a woman-child.

What had my life come to?

*Who is this jerkhole? Looks like they found him in a gutter.*

"Name's Ash. I might look like they found me in a gutter, but at least I don't have to sit in a high chair to eat dinner." I paused for a second, sifting through a few of her thoughts. "Nami Williams."

The drug had worn off enough to allow me to peek into her head, though I still couldn't penetrate Smith's.

*Did I say that out loud?* She was walking past me, but she stopped, glaring up at me. "You know my name. Congratulations." Her nostrils flared, and she grimaced. "You smell like a bag of ass."

She was a fiery little turd; I had to give her that.

Her past flitted through my mind. Though she put on a hardened exterior, minus the child-like appearance and clothing, fear gripped her. She worked on the top floor of the DC3 building.

The only survivor of Murdock's massacre.

Nami had been in the bathroom when the murderous spy had arrived.

The women's restroom by her cubicle was closed for maintenance, so she'd gone down a floor to use that one. She'd stopped to chat with someone in the break room when the bodies fell past the window.

Pure luck had saved her life.

"And your name is Ash? Really? Ever seen *The Evil Dead*?" Nami stood two feet in front of me, her neck craned back so we could make eye contact.

We couldn't have looked more different. I was a tall, scruffy, white guy. The coolest guy in every room when I walked in. She looked like she should be selling cookies door to door.

If I had a dollar for every time someone asked me if I'd seen *The Evil Dead*, well, I'd have a lot of dollars. Every dork and nerd who crossed my path had to

ramble on about how cool Bruce Campbell was.

More images from her past came to me then. My ability was returning quickly.

I saw Nami wearing costumes at Comic Con and doing bizarre photo shoots with similarly dressed friends. She collected Anime, Manga, and weird Japanese crap that I didn't recognize.

When added to her unusual look and foul mouth, Nami's tastes made her unique. In a weird way. She was moral though, and that went a long way for me. Besides, who was I to judge someone for being weird?

"Yeah, I've seen it. My name is Asher, not Ashley though. My parents didn't hate me that much."

She appraised my shirt. "You know what a shower is, right?"

"Mr. Benson, time is of the essence," Smith said. He still held the door open.

I leaned forward and lowered my voice. "Don't trust these guys. Something is wrong here."

"What?" Her eyes darted toward Smith. "You're the one who seems screwed up here, not him."

"Just keep your eyes open. Pretend you're one of those weird characters from your favorite anime."

"Huh?" She took a step away from me. *Who the hell is this guy?*

"I'm Ash. Try not to drool at my overwhelming masculinity."

I turned and climbed into the waiting SUV.

I had a date with the devil.

## 10 - Rain on My Parade

The ride over gave me time to gather my thoughts.

I didn't trust anything Smith had said. If his outfit was so powerful, so important, why did they have so few resources at their disposal? His explanation about most of his people being killed by Murdock was plausible, but why didn't they get more backup?

Had I not seen the video of the murders at the computer lab, I wouldn't have agreed to help him at all. If Murdock hadn't done something so heinous, I wasn't sure I could have known if I was even playing for the right team.

So much information had been dumped on me that I was still trying to process all of it.

Smith told me that Murdock wouldn't be able to control me the way he had other people, but he'd also been lying to me from the moment he opened his mouth. I found it more likely that he didn't give a shit what happened to me as long as I could help him locate Murdock.

Why a cemetery?

Why kill those innocent computer geeks?

Who was Smith? Hell, who was Murdock?

As the SUV pulled away from the building, I took in the surroundings. We definitely weren't on a military base of any kind. It appeared to be an industrial park.

What the hell did that mean?

I took a mental note of the numbers on the side of the building and the name of the street attached to it. Drew and I would have to do a little investigating later.

Speaking of Drew, I had to get through to him somehow.

The driver kept peering at me in the rearview mirror. He was military, Private Eckles, and he didn't know anything about my current situation. Just some kid put in a bad situation, and he wasn't even aware of it. He'd been ordered to give me a ride to a cemetery and that was it. They'd told him not to engage with me and to leave his cell phone at home.

Smith had covered his tracks, ensuring that I couldn't learn anything on the ride over.

*God, he smells awful. Why do I always get ordered to drive around the crazies?*

Damn, I really needed to take a shower.

My shoulder itched—it had since they'd administered the narcotic into me in the gentlest manner possible. I scratched it, feeling the small lump there from the injection. The memory of being jabbed with the needle pissed me off.

Bullets? No problem.

Getting punched in the face? Sissy stuff.

Needles? Hell no. I hated those things.

I was a walking paradox, what could I say?

The idea of grabbing Eckles around the neck and forcing him to pull over occurred to me. It would probably work, but I wasn't entirely sure that it would help. If Smith and his merry band of assholes were following us, then I wouldn't get too far.

And what would Murdock do to someone else today if I didn't help take him out?

I longed for two days ago when I would workout and then get blotto. Life was simple then. Shitty, but simple.

It took us about twenty minutes to get to the outskirts of the cemetery. We'd travelled further than I thought while I was drugged up earlier.

Dark clouds rolled on the horizon as I stepped out of the SUV. We were stopped in the parking lot of an auto-repair garage. Dave's something or other, it was called.

*Thank God, we're here. I couldn't take one more breath of that dude's B.O.*

I looked at Eckles through the passenger side window and pinched my nose closed. I waved a hand in front of my face and then pointed at him, insinuating that he smelled bad.

His face twisted in confusion and then he smelled his armpit, wondering if the smell had been him after all. He put the car in reverse and left me alone in the parking lot. His thoughts were hilarious.

Being able to read minds sucked, but there were a few times when I did get a kick out of it. You could really screw with people if the desire hit.

Dave was inside the garage, cursing up a storm because a wrench had slipped and he'd banged his knuckles on an engine block. Frustration baked out of the garage in angry bursts. Poor Dave had a less than pleasant week. He'd totaled his own car, and he was fairly certain that his wife was sleeping with his best friend. Rapping his knuckles was the last straw.

He was a man on the edge, and no one around him knew it.

I stopped at the edge of the parking lot, watching the storm clouds roll in from the other side of the cemetery. Murdock waited for me inside. I really wasn't looking forward to going in there, and Dave gave me a good reason to delay my arrival by a few more seconds.

A few other people were inside the garage, performing mundane office tasks. I sifted through their thoughts until I locked onto Dave's wife, Lisa. Invading people's privacy like that didn't feel good, ever, but I saw the awful things going through Dave's mind. If I didn't do something to help, I'd regret it forever.

A quick perusal of Lisa's recent activities showed that the only affair she'd had lately was with a showerhead. I could have done without seeing that, but at least I could pass some good news onto ol' Dave.

Christ, the things I saw in people's minds.

I stopped at the large, double-sized garage doors, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness beyond. Dave was bent over the front of a Ford Escape, ratcheting away under the hood.

"Hey, Dave."

He poked his head out, still muttering to himself about the throb in his knuckles. "Yeah? Whozzit?"

I opened my mouth to tell him that his wife wasn't cheating, but I stopped myself before the words could come out. How could I convince this guy of something that I couldn't possibly know? He'd probably think I was some kind of stalker creeping around his house at night.

"Well?" he asked. "What do ya want?" His oil-covered shirt didn't appear to have been through a washing machine in the past month or so.

"All of those horrible things you're thinking aren't true. Your wife isn't cheating. She misses you."

His mouth dropped open. *Who in the shit is this guy? How does he know that?*

I left the garage and walked across the parking lot, heading for the cemetery. Ol' Dave watched me go in complete bewilderment, but I could already feel the seeds of doubt about his wife being planted. I could only hope that would be enough.

As I walked past the first of the gravestones, I couldn't help but wonder if this was how Superman must have felt—not the good feeling of helping people, but the *compulsion* to do so. The constant, never-ending barrage of downtrodden people who needed something was hard to describe.

When people walked out in public, they put different faces on, masking their pain and sorrow and loneliness. They all needed something.

Love. Compassion. Money to pay the bills. An ear to bend.

Everyone needed something, and I was privy to it all. If I ignored them, just walked on by, what did that make me? Twice in the past twenty hours or so, I've had to go up to complete strangers to stop them from doing terrible things.

Some would call me a hero for that.

Being a hero sucked.

Enter my current situation, as I walked across a massive cemetery, intent on locating a lunatic with uncanny abilities. Why? Because I walked into a bank last night.

Yet I continued on, still eyeing the storm clouds. The breeze had picked up, bringing with it a warm wave of humid air. The rain was coming. The smell of earthworms hit me a few seconds later.

I pulled the transceiver from my pocket and stuffed the small bud into my ear.

"Mr. Benson, can you read me?" a voice asked. It crackled as the man spoke, but I could make out what he said.

"Yeah, I hear you."

"What were you doing? We've been trying to contact you since you arrived at the cemetery."

"Had to take a leak."

"We're monitoring you via satellite. What did you do in that garage?"

"Took a piss."

"Mr. Benson, need I remind you that—"

"Shut up and tell me where to go already. There's a rerun of Cheers on tonight that I want to catch, so let's get on with it." I stopped beside a small mausoleum and looked out over the expansive lot.

Gravestones and trees dotted the landscape as far as I could see. The place was massive.

"There is a funeral a few hundred yards ahead of you. We suggest you check there first."

"You want me to crash a funeral?"

"No, we want you to check on it."

"And if he's there, that isn't going to go well."

Silence on their end.

As I started walking again, the first drop of rain plopped into my hair. More followed. Within twenty seconds, a torrential downpour soaked my clothes. The ground turned soupy under my feet as I kept going.

Lightning arced across the sky, trailed by the rumble of thunder.

"Ominous," I muttered.

I spotted the funeral a minute later. A few people fled the rain, half-jogging their way back to a line of cars. Others opened umbrellas and huddled together.

The rain grew heavier, slowing my pace. My heart beat faster as I approached. The idea of coming face-to-face with a man capable of making people commit horrible crimes finally sank in.

I was about to step into some deep shit, and I didn't have any boots on.

A woman stood off to my right, staring down at a plain tombstone with minimal etchings on the front. Her hair was matted to her head from the rain, but she didn't seem to care. I blocked off my mind, keeping her thoughts away from my own. She was grieving and deserved to do it in private.

I'd almost walked by her when I paused and turned back, a thought occurring to me.

"Excuse me, Miss?" I took a step toward her, putting on my best apologetic look. "Do you have a cell phone I can use?"

"Lieutenant! You are not authorized to—"

I tore the earpiece out and cupped it in my hand. The man droned on against my palm, his voice little more than a faint buzz.

The woman looked over at me, rain coursing down her face, mixing with tears running from her red-rimmed eyes. "I'm sorry?"

"I hate to bother you, but my ride out of here left without me and I need to call my friend. I don't have a cell phone, so..."

She wiped the water from her face and gave me a small, embarrassed smile. "Of course." She pulled her phone from her purse and handed it over.

I dialed Drew's number and held it to my ear, trying my best to shield it from the rain with my free hand. After five rings, I was getting ready to end the call when he answered.

"Detective Lloyd," he said.

"Drew, it's Ash."

"Jesus Christ, man. Where the hell are you? I got a call this morning from that big-boobed—"

"I'm in big trouble here. The feds grabbed me, and now they have me running some kind of ass-backwards mission for them. I'm at Mt. Olivet Cemetery outside of D.C. I need you to haul ass down here and get me."

The woman stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

Drew paused, then said, "You're helping the feds with a mission? At a cemetery? You better start making some sense."

"I don't have time to explain, Drew. Just get down here. The shit is about to hit the proverbial fan."

"I'm on my way, but—"



“You might want to call 9-1-1 and tell them to get over here too. I don’t think this is going to be pretty.” I closed the woman’s flip phone, wiped some rain away from it, and handed it back to her. “Thanks. Sorry for your loss.”

“Are you an escaped prisoner?” she asked, clutching her phone to her chest.

“Nah. I’m a psychic working in conjunction with a super-secret spy agency. We’re tracking down a man who can kill people with the power of his mind. He’s an international terrorist and a master of disguise.”

She blinked at me.

“Judging from the expression on your face, you think I’m insane. It sounds pretty crazy to me too.” I faced the funeral again. “You should get out of here. Things are going to get really ugly soon.”

The woman slowly backed away from me. I didn’t have to be a mind reader to know that she thought I was a drugged-out psychopath. My t-shirt and stench didn’t help.

She fled between the rows of grave markers, throwing glances over her shoulder every few feet. Unfortunately, she was heading more or less in the direction of the funeral, so she wouldn’t be out of harm’s way.

I started after the woman, and that really scared the hell out of her. Her pace picked up, which made me feel even worse. I looked so horrible that I was actually scaring her *toward* the terrorist.

Another clap of thunder slammed down on us. The rain came down in sheets. My shoes slid in the mud forming between the graves.

And then I felt it.

A crushing, forceful weight that bore down on my mind.

It pushed all the other thoughts coming from different people to the side, creating a singular, encompassing tunnel between my mind and Murdock’s. I could feel his fury, his rage, and an intolerable hate that permeated his every action.

The power of his mind caught me off guard and I staggered sideways, catching myself on a shoulder-high cross marking a grave. My breathing went ragged as I fought back against his will, trying to reassert myself.

I waited for him to take over my motor skills, to force me to bash my head into the stone I clutched.

Nothing happened.

*Who are you?*

The voice didn’t come as the typical echoes of other people, but as a thunderous bellow that made me flinch. It was as if he had an amplifier in my mind. I forced myself to my feet and focused on dampening the volume of his thoughts.

*Name's Ash. I'm here to deliver an Asher Benson Special Delivery.*

I put the earpiece back into place and held my finger against it. It worked without me touching it, but I always wanted to look like one of those Secret Service guys in movies. "I've got him. Send in the cavalry."

"Roger that, Lieutenant. ETA two minutes."

"Two minutes? He's going to fillet me in two goddamn minutes."

They didn't come back again.

*Smith sent you.* Murdock said it as a statement, not a question. *You've made a grave error in coming here.*

*Grave? Please tell me that pun was intentional.* Though communicating with someone without speaking was odd and surreal, it came almost naturally. I didn't have to think about how to do it.

*You mock me? Do you understand what I'm about to do to you? Do you understand what fate awaits you?*

*Why do you talk like that? You sound like a moron. Me no hablo dickheadese.*

Why I decided to antagonize a monster, I didn't know. As I turned to walk back the way I'd come, intent on leaving before the inevitable firefight happened, I spotted a man with long, light-brown dreadlocks standing just behind the funeral. He scanned around the cemetery with his eyes before locking onto me.

*There you are. Do you hablo this?*

A handful of the mourners standing by the open grave spun around and faced me. The priest performing for the service dropped his Bible.

"Oh shit," I muttered. "You guys better hurry up and get here."

The voice in my ear crackled again. "I suggest you run, Lieutenant."

"Gee, you think?"

The mourners burst forward, sprinting straight at me. They tossed umbrellas to the ground as they came, the heavy rain soaking them through in seconds.

A woman in a black dress led the charge. She kicked off long-stemmed heels as she ran.

Two lanky teenage boys came up behind her. They couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen. Their youth allowed them to pass by her after only a few steps.

A pudgy man, likely the husband and father, lagged behind. His ample belly swayed as he chugged along, his middle-aged muscles struggling against years of inactivity.

The elderly, white-haired priest brought up the rear.

I turned on my heels and ran for it. Standing around and fighting an onslaught of civilians sent my way didn't feel like the best of ideas.

My shoes slid in the mud as I tried to accelerate, so I had to stay at a jog to keep from crashing into the grave markers. After I'd made it a dozen feet, I looked back over my shoulder.

The family of four hadn't gained on me, but they weren't falling behind either.

Pain exploded in my chest.

My legs flew out from under me, and my back slammed down to the soggy ground.

The air burst from my lungs.

Diaphragm spasmed.

Ribs ached.

Water splashed into my ear, wetting the electronic piece shoved in the canal. It hissed and crackled.

I tore it free.

A caretaker stood by my left shoulder, a shovel held in his hands. His perplexed eyes appraised me as Murdock controlled his actions remotely. He raised the shovel overhead, intent on dashing my brains out.

I rolled to the right as the spade slashed into the ground, splashing water against my muddy t-shirt. The roll brought me to my feet, and I closed the distance between us in a flash.

The caretaker had just pulled the blade from the ground when my fist connected with his temple. He crumpled to the ground, arms loose as he lost consciousness.

My lungs quaked in my chest as they struggled to sip in air. I leaned against a large, intricate, stone angel. It stood taller than I did. I grabbed its arm, hanging some of my weight from it.

Lightning lit up the cemetery.

The combination of my running and the caretaker swinging had magnified the impact of the shovel. I felt like I'd been in a car accident. My legs were weak, knees wobbly.

Squeezed my eyes shut. Focused on relaxing, and letting some air in.

Fat rain pelted my face.

As my lungs stopped seizing, the first of the teenagers reached me.

I pushed away from the angel and squared off with him, raising my arms in a boxing stance. The teens weren't old enough to overpower me, but both of them combined could do some damage.

He lunged at me, reaching for my shoulders.

I grabbed one of his forearms and jerked him forward as I stepped to the side. He fell face first into the mud and slid for several feet before coming to a stop.

The next teen reached me a moment later. He threw a sloppy, unskilled punch. I rolled my shoulder up, letting it accept the brunt of the impact, before shoving him backwards. He tripped over a low tombstone and crashed to the ground.

The father came next. His lack of conditioning produced an audible wheeze and a flushed face. The swaying belly hanging from his midsection shook like a bowl of jelly with each step.

His wife, who had been ahead of him, was nowhere to be seen. The priest was still a few dozen yards away.

I dropped to a knee as the beefy husband drew near and punched him in the gut.

He doubled over, eyes bulging, mouth working like a landed fish.

I stood and reached down, looping my forearm and elbow around his exposed neck. Locking in a guillotine choke, I squeezed, cutting off the blood flow to his brain.

His body went limp a few seconds later.

I eased him to the ground, not wanting his head to crack off a gravestone.

The teens were getting back to their feet, so I turned and ran away.

*Impressive, Murdock bellowed in my mind. But why are you running away? Don't you have a special delivery for me?*

The wife rounded a mausoleum ahead, cutting off my escape route. I could hear the teens' heavy breaths behind me. I turned right, heading for a road running along the edge of the cemetery.

The whine of a helicopter's rotors overpowered the dull roar of the rain.

It appeared over the tree line ahead of me, flying low and fast. It banked hard, slowing its momentum enough for men to lower themselves to the ground with ropes. They detached and the bird lifted into the sky, disappearing over the trees again.

Six armed agents progressed between the grave markers, rifles pointed at Murdock, who hadn't moved yet. They barked orders at him that I couldn't make out over the rain.

*What the hell?* I thought. *Why are there only six of them?*

Murdock laughed in my head, maniacal and cold.

I stopped, watching the confrontation.

The mother and her boys stopped as well. They looked around confusedly, shaking their heads.

“What’s going on?” the mother asked.

I didn’t answer. Kept watching the armed men.

They moved toward Murdock in a tight formation, leaving a few feet between them. They stopped a hundred yards away, still shouting. Their rifles lowered then, bodies going rigid.

The deep rumble of an engine came from the road. An eighteen-wheeler appeared through the gaps in the trees, accelerating along the street running parallel to the cemetery.

It veered, tires screeching, weight shifting, and rumbled through a wrought-iron gate running the perimeter of the property.

The truck plowed through the headstones and memorials, churning them to rubble under the heavy tires.

I watched in horror as the agents stood rooted in place. They didn’t turn to look at the truck.

At the last second, the driver jerked the wheel to the right and slammed the brake.

The tires locked, the truck skidding sideways.

The trailer fell on the agents, crushing them under its metal bulk.

They never made a sound.

Top soil and mud piled up against the roof of the cab as it slid to a stop.

Murdock laughed the entire time.

Then he turned his attention back on me.

Something wrapped around my neck, pulling my head back, a white-hot line of pain searing into my skin. My fingers brushed against small beads wrapped around my throat—a rosary.

The priest’s warm breath blew against my ear as he grunted in exertion, pulling harder, cutting off the last bit of air I had. My head pulsated as the pain increased.

My vision darkened.

I had seconds left before I went out.

In a last-ditch effort, I snapped my head back as hard as I could. Felt the crunch of the priest’s nose against the crown of my head. He gagged as blood poured down his throat.

His grip on the rosary eased enough for me to slip two fingers between it and my neck. I yanked against the beads, breaking the string holding them together. My knees buckled, and I fell to the soggy earth.

Sirens whooped from somewhere far off.

I fought to stay conscious, willing my vision to clear. It didn’t work very well.

Pain bloomed on my right cheek and I fell over, landing on my side. The world swam before me. Rain fell into my eyes, forcing them to blink rapidly.

I stared up at the mother. Her black dress, soaked through, clung to her figure. Mascara ran down her cheeks. Her eyes were wild, and she reared back and kicked me in my already-sore chest.

The sirens grew louder.

Murdock's cackling died down. *Saved by the bell. Give my regards to Smith.*

The teens joined in, stomping and kicking.

I turtled, protecting my head and neck as best I could.

And then they stopped.

The mother gaped down at me.

"What's happening to us?" she asked.

"You're kicking my ass." The words came out like a croak. I craned my neck and watched as Murdock fled through the cemetery, disappearing in the rain.

## 11 - Hell in a Cell

The cop wasn't gentle as he cinched the handcuffs on my wrists.

Despite the fact that I was bloody and beaten, they arrested me and not the family or priest. I couldn't really blame them. Between my attire, smell, and size, how could they believe that I was the victim?

Who would have believed that a priest had tried to strangle me?

I didn't bother trying to explain what happened. No one would buy a story about mind control and terrorists. Smith could sort that out for me.

The police officers were confused as hell. They marched me through the graveyard, asking me questions that I didn't bother answering. We went past the overturned tractor-trailer. No one understood what it had to do with anything.

Watered-down blood seeped out from under the dented metal of the trailer.

The driver had climbed out of the left door of the cab, which now faced the sky. I heard him trying to explain why he'd driven into the cemetery. The officers didn't know that the bodies under the trailer were federal agents.

"I can't explain it," the driver said. Deep lines ran in his forehead as he stared at the truck. "I just felt like I *had* to drive in here. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. My mind would think 'Hit the brakes!' But my foot pushed on the gas instead."

The cops cuffed him too. Poor bastard.

Another officer slopped through the muck, coming straight at me, his face set and hard. The man was stocky, his barrel chest coming from genetics rather than the iron game. His metal name tag read Long. His mind told me his first name was James. "What the fuck happened here?"

"I couldn't explain it in a way that would make sense to you," I said.

"Looks to me like you crashed a funeral and picked a fight with the wrong family." The open contempt with which he looked at me told me just as much as his thoughts.

The more I tried to help people lately, the more screwed up my life became.

"And how does that explain the truck?" I asked.

“Fuck if I know.” Long gestured to the cop behind me. “Get him the hell out of here. We’ll have a little chat about this later on, sweetheart.”

My head hurt like a son of a bitch.

Got my ass kicked by The Brady Bunch.

As they shoved me in the back of a cruiser, I kept waiting for the helicopter to come back, for Smith to arrive. Murdock had escaped and their best chance of finding him, me, was being taken to a concrete cell.

They never came.

Half an hour later, I was sitting on a bench in the holding area of the jail, studying the odd mixture of blood and mud covering every square inch of my body. The exertion of the fight had me sweating buckets in the squad car, which reeked of booze.

Portable toilets smelled better than I did.

The other people in the large cell stayed clear of me, crowding together on the other benches. There weren’t many of them because it was only midafternoon. There were a few drunks, a handful of thieves, and one guy who decided to steal money from his employer’s bank account.

No murderers or rapists, fortunately. Reliving their memories would have made me strangle them, and I was in enough trouble already.

I spent most of the time staring at my hands. Did they have more blood on them? I couldn’t tell. Six agents died in that cemetery. I ran through every possible scenario, torturing myself as I tried to think of a way I could have saved them. Having an extraordinary ability also gave me an inordinate amount of guilt if I couldn’t help someone.

Smith only sending six men still weighed on me. They knew how dangerous Murdock was, yet they only had half a dozen people rushing in to contain him. Why not use a sniper and take him out from range?

The puzzle pieces weren’t fitting.

And why could Murdock access the minds of Smith’s men and I couldn’t? Was his power so advanced that he could break through mental defenses that I couldn’t even dent? That didn’t bode well for me.

Drew stepped in front of the cell shortly thereafter. His bald head reflected the light from the ceiling, making him shiny. He looked like Mr. Clean.

“What the hell have you gotten yourself into?” His suit was as immaculate as ever. Drew didn’t like things to be messy or disheveled—basically the opposite of me. “Why do you look like you entered a demolition derby, but forgot that you had to use a car?”

I walked up to the bars, thankful to see a familiar face. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”



He crossed his arms. "Try anyway."

"Can you get me out of here first? I'm a sitting duck in here."

"A sitting duck? For who, the government?"

"Yeah, and... someone else. Someone worse."

Drew's frown deepened. "No such thing as someone worse than the government, you know that. Once they get on your ass, they don't stop."

"Believe me. If the guy I was chasing finds out I'm in here, I'm a dead man. You gotta get me out of here."

"The officer at the front desk said that you assaulted a family in a cemetery. Color me confused."

"They attacked me."

"A family."

"Yeah. Kicked the shit out of me too. Maybe literally, I haven't checked my underwear yet."

"That would explain the smell."

"Are you going to get me out of here or not?"

Drew sighed. "Do you know how much heat you're bringing down on me? I actually have a job. If I spend my time babysitting you, then I don't get to my caseload."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is my involvement in trying to catch the senator's murderer an inconvenience to you?" I squeezed the bars in my hands, holding back my frustration as best I could. I didn't want to spill everything that had happened yet. There were too many ears around.

Drew's eyes narrowed. "The senator's murderer? He committed suicide. You were really adamant about that point earlier."

I held his gaze, staying quiet.

After several seconds, Drew said, "Let me see what I can do. I know one of the detectives in this precinct." He disappeared through a metal door, leaving me to stew in the cell.

The other inmates watched as I paced around. Why hadn't Smith's goons come to spring me out of jail yet? Murdock got away, why wouldn't they come get me?

The appearance of their headquarters still bothered me. The industrial, civilian look of it didn't ring true. Something was off there. My hands scratched at my shoulder again. I really wanted to get my hands on those bastards who grabbed me from the street.

No one stabbed me with a needle and got away with it.

Mr. Embezzler watched me over wire-rimmed glasses. The man couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet.

*He's so big. He'd fold me in half like a pretzel and have his way with me. Why, oh why did I think I could get away with taking Mike's money? God, if you get me out of this, I'll spend the rest of my life doing the right things. I can't survive in here.*

I gave him a wink as I walked by.

The color drained from his face.

Drew came back a few minutes later. "Good news—the family isn't going to press charges. They're confused about the whole thing. No one upfront understands what happened, but they're going to release you into my custody after they ask you some more questions. It'll take an hour or two to get you through the system."

I stopped by the bars again, frowning. "I don't know that I have an hour or two."

"You really did fall into some shit here, didn't you?"

"Deep shit."

"I just pulled a ton of strings to get you out of here. I'm not sure that I can get anymore favors."

"Drew," I said, leaning in, lowering my voice. "There are other people like me."

"Assholes?"

"I'm suddenly trying to figure out why we're friends."

"Because I'm your *only* friend. Mind readers? Is that what you're saying?"

I nodded, looking around to make sure no one could hear us. "One of them can control people. That's why the family attacked me in the cemetery and why the senator shot himself. If he finds out that I'm here, everyone in this building is as good as dead."

"He can control your actions?" Drew's voice grew louder.

"Yeah. I watched him make people jump out of the windows of a government building."

"Are you talking about the mass suicide that happened at the Cyber Crimes Center?" Drew shook his head. "You're telling me that this guy made an entire group of people kill themselves? No way."

"It's not that big a leap from what I can do."

"It's a quantum leap."

"Fine, it's *Quantum Leap*. I'll call Scott Bakula for help as soon as you get my ass out of here."

The people sitting on the benches stirred as they overhead our conversation. They'd already assumed I was nuts. Our little powwow cemented their

suspicious. Mr. Embezzler was focusing on not pissing his pants as he cringed away from me.

Drew started back to the door again. “Look, I’ll go try to sweet talk the people taking care of your paperwork, but I can’t be sure that it’ll work.” He disappeared again.

I resumed my pacing. Too much time had passed while I sat in the cell. At this point, I didn’t want Smith or any of his crew to come get me. If they came now, after letting me talk to how many other people, then they probably weren’t going to grant me my freedom.

In fact, they might want to take me out too.

I knew a hell of a lot about them now.

Too much for them to let me sit through a few police interrogations.

Drew came back yet again, but this time he had Officer Long in tow. The man had practically spit on me when we talked at the cemetery.

“—no goddamn way. You aren’t taking him out of here, period. I don’t *care* if you banged Officer Perkins last year. She and I will have a little discussion about that later.” Long fixed his gaze on me. “I’ve got your ass for seventy-two hours, Princess. I don’t give a shit if that family refuses to press charges—I want to know what the fuck happened in that cemetery. You hear me?”

Drew held up a hand. “Look, goddamn it, I already told you that I’m a detective. We’re on the same side here—”

“You know how many shits I give that you’re a detective?”

“I’m guessing not many.” Drew pointed at me. “This man is a veteran with a Distinguished Service Cross and a Purple Heart. He’s not some piece of dirt criminal. He won’t—”

“He can shove those medals up his ass for all I care. My job is to protect the people in my district and by God, that’s what I’m going to do. He was there, he was fighting, and he knows what the fuck is going on around here.”

“By keeping me here, you might be putting all of these people in danger.” I swept my hand around the cell behind me.

The embezzler’s bladder was reaching critical mass.

“Is that a threat, you smarmy piece of—?”

The Bridge formed in my mind, blotting out Officer Long’s words.

I staggered back on wobbly legs and collapsed onto one of the benches, cradling my head in my hands.

Murdock cackled. *I’m here to deliver an Asher Benson Special Delivery.*

Shook my head, cleared the cobwebs.

Long stood ramrod straight, cheeks twitching. He reached for his pistol.

“What are you doing?” Drew asked.

“Murdock’s here!” I found my feet again. “He’s in Long’s head!”

Drew frowned at me. “What? Who?”

Long pulled his pistol from its holster, raised it. Aimed at my chest.

“Shit!” Drew lunged at him, shoving his arm away as the pistol barked.

The crack was deafening in the cell. Without carpet or furniture to mute the blast, the sound amplified, stabbing at my ears.

Mr. Embezzler stalked forward, his small hands balled into fists.

*Nothing funny to say, Benson?* Murdock laughed again. *Do you speak dickheadese now?*

The other inmates stood from their benches, muscles taut, posture unnaturally straight. I counted six of them. They varied in size and levels of physical fitness, but they had the numbers to put me six feet under.

Drew fell to the ground, scrambling for possession of the gun with Long.

It fired again. I cupped my ears against the pain, gritting my teeth.

Mr. Embezzler drew near, tiny fists rearing back.

I dropped him with a punch to the nose.

Cartilage crunched under my knuckles.

He sprawled backward, landing at the feet of the other men, tripping two of them. The others kept coming. Their eyes betrayed their actions. The last thing they wanted to do was pick a fight with the large, rank, crazy man.

Drew cursed as Long drove an elbow into his forehead.

Another prisoner approached. He was larger and fatter, with hands like a catcher’s mitt. I doubted he was stronger than I was, but he had a lot of bulk to throw around. I circled right, getting a row of metal benches between us.

As he threw one leg over the seat, I dropped to a knee and gave him an uppercut to the crotch.

His face went beet-red, eyes ovals of surprise. I wondered if the top of his head might pop off. He fell over, hands cradling his groin.

*Ask and you shall receive*, I thought. *Your special delivery is on the way, Murcock.*

The cackling in my head died down, replaced by a building fury.

Drew had rolled on top of Long and was throwing heavy punches at the cop’s face. Three in a row landed before Long went still on the cold concrete. Small groans escaped his open, bleeding mouth.

“Jesus Christ.” Drew sat back and watched through the bars as the other prisoners circled around me.

He scrambled for Long’s gun.

“No,” I said. “Don’t shoot them. They aren’t in control of themselves.”

“But—”

“Just get me out of here! How many times do I have to say it?”

A tall, skinny, malnourished drug addict came at me next. I latched onto his mind with my own, letting my consciousness wrap around his.

That made three of us in his head. It was getting crowded.

I felt his scrambling thoughts as they wallowed under the oppressive control of Murdock. He resisted the foreign programming, striving to regain his own motor skills, but he couldn't overpower Murdock.

For a moment, I wondered if I could negate the control with my own ability. We had to get out of here before more cops with guns came back and turned me into Swiss cheese. There wasn't any time to experiment.

I had to deal with the men closing in on me.

My telepathy gave me an unfair advantage in fights.

Most people thought about what they were going to do before they acted. They envisioned throwing a hook or a jab. I'd excelled in my boxing because I was always one step ahead. I knew what was coming. They thought it, and then I countered.

Was it cheating? Yeah. Did I give a shit? No.

The skinny man prepared to throw a looping, overhand right. Unfortunately for him, no one outside of Chuck Liddell could land that punch.

I stepped left, bending at the knees and waist.

Swung a hard hook at his side.

Connected with a liver shot that would have dropped King Kong.

His legs buckled and he fell to the floor in a heap, his body not responding to Murdock's commands.

A solid blow to the liver was one of the most debilitating strikes you could land. Skinny would be out of commission for a good half a minute, but he'd be fine after that. The effects, while devastating, were only temporary.

Drew searched Long's pockets. “I've got his keys.”

“Hey, take your time. It's not like I'm fighting off a goddamn mob or anything.”

The next man that reached me was in decent shape, but he'd never been in a fight in his life. His movements were clumsy and stilted as he tried to get a hold of me. The wedding ring on his finger gave me pause. I really didn't want to hurt these people.

I kept circling the benches, using them as natural barriers.

Gunshots barked from another room.

Drew looked at the closed door leading to the rest of the building. “Now what?”

I didn't answer as I threw another combination, dropping the married man with a jab and a cross. His teeth sliced into the skin covering my knuckles.

It hurt like hell.

I squeezed the hand into a tight fist as I retreated toward the cell door. Blood pattered the floor, snaking a trail that the final two men followed.

Drew sifted through the keys. "I don't know which one it is. Hell, he might not even have the key to this door."

"I don't want to hear—"

The words caught in my throat when I saw Drew's body stiffen. The keys fell from his hands.

He brushed the bottom of his jacket back and reached for the pistol holstered on his hip.

*Killed by a friend. Poetic, isn't it?*

I reached through the bars with my sliced hand and grabbed Drew's tie. My blood stained his blue dress shirt.

I put my other hand against the door and yanked back as hard as I could.

Drew lurched forward. His head slammed against the bars. The focus left his eyes as he slid to the floor.

Arms wrapped around my shoulders, dragging me away. My grip on the door tore free as an elbow drove into my wrist. Agony shot up my forearm.

The last two men, both nondescript and reeking of booze, threw me to the floor. They kicked at my sore ribs, sending bolts of pain across my chest.

I kicked low and hard, catching one of them in the ankle. He cried out and stumbled back, the joint struggling to hold his weight. He wanted to bend over and hold his ankle, but Murdock tightened his grip on the man's mind. He grimaced as he came at me again.

I slid away from them until my back hit a wall. I used it to get back to my feet.

Three more gunshots came from somewhere else in the station. Closer this time.

Someone screamed.

The men came for me. The first dove at me in an attempted tackle. I sidestepped and let him run headfirst into the wall. His body went limp, and he was out of the fight.

The second caught me in the eye with a good punch. My vision went black for a second as I staggered sideways. I'd been punched in the face a lot over the past six months, so I recovered quickly and landed a hard hook, which sent him sprawling.

I angled my way back to the door.

Mr. Embezzler stood by the far wall, his nose tilted at an unnatural angle. Blood coursed over his lips, staining his shirt and trousers. He started toward me again.

The others stirred as Murdock forced them to keep fighting.

I feinted a kick at the nearest man's crotch.

He dropped his hands to cover up his boys.

I caught him with a teeth-rattling uppercut.

Spun around, reached through the bars.

Grabbed the keys.

## 12 - Payback

The bench across the street from the police station was rather uncomfortable.

Taking the pressure off his bad foot pleased Murdock though. He would sit there for a few more minutes while he toyed with Smith's puppet.

Asher Benson, a name wholly unfamiliar to Murdock.

He'd fought admirably in the cemetery. This new player could have been a solid ally under different circumstances. The idea of killing one of his own, one of the few living telepaths, felt traitorous. An act of fratricide.

Now, though, Benson would have to pay the price for Smith's treachery.

Murdock ruffled his short, brown hair. The wig of dreadlocks and the torrential rain had matted his hair. His tongue ran across the caps that disguised his teeth. The rubber nosepiece, which widened the bridge, made his skin itch.

None of that could wipe the smile from his face though.

Creating chaos brought great joy to Murdock.

He'd spent years in that blasted desert, forcing Muslim radicals to shoot their brothers and bomb their own training centers. It was a fulfilling experience, but it paled in comparison to creating the same anarchy in the States.

First-world mayhem was definitely preferable. The buildings were nicer, the people more refined. Watching them burn gave him a greater feeling of accomplishment.

He would bring it down.

All of it.

But first, he had to erase the one man who had a chance of stopping him.

Finding him had been easy. The news reports had said which police department had taken him into custody. It didn't take telepathic powers to follow the trail.

Murdock's grin grew wider as Ash punched a man in the liver. A perfect, practiced blow. Destroying him truly was a shame.

A few of the officers in the front of the building reacted to the sounds coming from the holding area. They rose to see what the commotion was, but Murdock



had other plans for them. How would the country react to the loss of an entire police department?

He wanted to find out.

“Let’s say hello to your lover, Captain Frank.” Murdock spoke aloud as he latched onto the captain’s mind.

A middle-aged woman sat beside Murdock’s decoy on the bench. He’d forced the man to put on a disguise and was looking through his eyes at the station. If his plan worked, then the decoy would help take the heat off Murdock as he escaped.

The woman secured a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry?”

Murdock glared at her through the decoy’s eyes. “Leave.”

“What?”

“Leave now.”

“But I’m waiting for the bus.”

A sigh escaped his lips. Why did no one ever listen? He secured a grip on her thoughts and forced her to stay on the bench beside him. To watch and listen to the carnage inside.

To help put the fear of God into those who would find her amidst the rubble.

He focused on Captain Frank again. The officer of forty stood and walked past the water cooler. The man fought against Murdock’s control, but he lacked the mental fortitude to win.

Frank freed his gun, finger caressing the trigger. *Please! No!*

Yes.

Murdock watched through Frank’s eyes as he stopped by the front desk. He stared down at the woman behind it, Sally Matthews. They’d spent the past six months in a torrid affair.

Their spouses suspected the tryst, but hadn’t vocalized it yet.

Now, they never would.

Sally looked up at Frank. Her brow furrowed at his odd expression. “You OK, Frank?”

He shot her through the eye.

## 13 - Shit Creek

I tried three of the keys in the lock before one of the prisoners reached me.

He threw a punch as I spun around to face him. I bobbed away from it as best I could, absorbing the brunt of it with an upraised forearm.

I shoved him back, sending him over a bench. His body slowed the progress of the others long enough for me to try two more keys.

The second one worked, and the lock clicked free. Fortunately, this jail hadn't gone high tech and switched over to electronic locks yet. The fact that Long even had a key to the cell was blind luck.

Something had finally gone my way.

Drew's stirring body blocked part of the door, and I could only open it a foot or so. I squeezed through the slim gap as a hand grabbed the sleeve of my shirt. The fabric tore free as I spun around and slammed the door on the outstretched forearm.

Mr. Embezzler cried out, but didn't retract his arm. Murdock wouldn't let him.

I hated doing so much damage to these guys. While most of them weren't innocents, they didn't deserve to get the shit kicked out of them.

Keys rattled against the door leading to the rest of the building. Someone was coming back to the holding area.

A front kick to the chest sent Mr. Embezzler reeling again. I slammed the door closed and tore the key from the lock.

The other door opened on my left. I ran toward it.

A gun appeared first, sliding through the opening.

I grabbed the wrist that followed and yanked it toward me as I threw the door open. I drove my head forward, throwing the first head-butt of my life.

My vision became a field of stars as my forehead crashed into the nose of an officer. The pistol fell from his hand as he stumbled back. He fell to his ass, his back leaning against the far wall. Droplets of blood dotted his uniform. His name tag read Frank.

“Shit that hurt.” I picked up the .45 and poked my head through the door, shaking it slightly to clear the cobwebs. A bullet whizzed past my face for the effort. The door opened to a hallway leading to an office area to the left. Another door with an exit sign above it was on the right.

The concussive blast of a shotgun filled the hall.

“Judy, what the hell are you doing? Drop the gun!”

The male voice, deep and panicked, came from a series of desks at the end of the hall. I couldn’t see the speaker, or the shooter, but I knew that Murdock was playing games with them—making them shoot at friends and colleagues.

Someone else cried, “Sally! Oh my God!”

Drew moaned behind me.

Long’s pistol went in the back of my waistband. I clicked the safety off the other officer’s gun and held it by my side. The idea of shooting a cop made me cringe.

*I’m going to kill you, Murdock.*

*Others have tried and failed. You will too.*

He didn’t laugh in my head anymore. His tone was calm and collected, as if I’d interrupted him as he read a newspaper. That disturbed me more than his maniacal cackles.

Drew stirred. He tried to sit up, but his coordination hadn’t returned yet. His eyes were still unfocused.

I bent down, looped one of his arms over my shoulders, and hoisted him to his feet. He was on my left side, the pistol held in my right hand. He shuffled his feet a bit as we walked back to the door, but he didn’t take much of his weight off me.

Sweat stung my eyes.

Drew weighed over two hundred pounds, and he was almost half a foot shorter than I was. Dragging him around the police station would wear me out in no time.

“You need to lay off the doughnuts,” I grunted.

The hallway was still clear so I dragged him along, heading for the exit to the right.

A gun cracked behind us. A puff of drywall dust burst from the wall beside my head. It got in my eyes.

I swung us around, blinking rapidly, and raised the pistol.

A young officer stood at the end of the hall, reloading a .45. His thoughts floated into my mind, even though I wasn’t trying to read them.

My mental barriers were crumbling from the beating I’d taken. If not for The Bridge formed between Murdock and me, the effect would have been

overwhelming.

Guilt and bewilderment consumed the officer as he fished a magazine from his belt. He'd shot two of his colleagues, and he didn't know why.

I sighted his chest, but hesitated.

He didn't deserve to die. None of them did.

He jammed the magazine home.

Pointed the business end at us.

I aimed at his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

The impact spun him around. He didn't utter a sound as he fell to his knees, the gun slipping from his hand.

A barrage of gunshots came from the lobby. The cacophony reminded me of my third day outside of the Green Zone. All hell had broken loose at the checkpoint I manned—mortar blasts, automatic gunfire, and cries of agony.

I bit down, fighting against the emotions roiling to the surface.

Saw Sergeant Barker's face on the cop I'd just shot.

Smelled the blood dripping from my lacerated knuckles.

Felt my years-old guilt rising.

*We could have been brothers, Asher. I understand your pain.*

*I'll remember you said that when I'm watching your body twitch.*

The presence of two more cops came to me as they moved through the office area. They were stalking toward the hallway.

I swung Drew around and kicked at the push bar running across the middle of the exit. The door flew open, flooding the hall with a wave of heat and harsh sunlight. Squinting against it, I dragged my only friend outside.

We stumbled onto a side street behind the station.

*Where do you think you're going?*

I didn't answer him. We had to get some distance between Murdock and us. He would send the entire city after us if we didn't get away from him.

We went down the alley, Drew mumbling incoherently, his chin resting against his chest. His feet moved a little better, and his eyes fluttered. I had to get him away from Murdock before he woke up, or he'd be used against me again.

The door crashed open behind us.

Guns fired.

The brick walls of the buildings on either side of us chipped away as bullets punched into them.

We rounded the corner and limped down the cracked sidewalk. Traffic was light with only a single car pulling out of a parking spot on the side of the street. A couple walked into a small ice cream parlor, arm in arm. Otherwise, the block was empty.

I tried to remember the range of Murdock's ability, but couldn't recall the number.

My hand throbbed.

Drew lifted his head after we made it another ten yards. "Ashley?"

The douche called me Ashley every now and then just to piss me off. The dig indicated that he was in charge of himself again. Murdock had moved on to other people.

The engine of the car across the street revved. The tires squealed.

Glare on the windshield hid the driver from my view. It crossed the painted lines, rocketing straight at us.

"Ashley? The hell?"

"I'm a little busy right now." I aimed at the front right tire and emptied the mag.

Holes punched in the grill and bumper, chipping away the paint. The tire popped, shifting the weight of the car. It careened away from us, slamming into a parked Cadillac.

The airbags deployed. Car alarms blared.

We kept going.

Needed distance.

I dropped the pistol to the sidewalk and pulled the other one from my waistband.

Drew's feet moved with more grace, taking some of his weight off my fatigued shoulders. "What happened?"

"You tried to kill me. I kicked your ass though."

He raised a hand to his forehead. A bruise had already started to form. "My head is killing me."

"I slammed your face off the bars of my cell."

"You—"

Drew's muscles went rigid. His thoughts were suppressed by Murdock's will. He reached up, tried to grab my head. His motor skills hadn't fully returned yet, so his attempts were weak and feeble.

I knocked his arms away and pushed on even harder. Blood splattered his suit from the cut on my hand.

He tried to plant his feet and pull away. Though his strength hadn't returned, his weight slowed us down. We inched forward, wrestling with one another like a couple of high school kids in a fight.

I cocked my arm back, getting ready to pistol whip him unconscious, when he relaxed again.

The Bridge between Murdock and I crumbled. Thoughts of people in the buildings around us flooded into my mind. I grimaced and concentrated on turning their volume down.

Drew huffed and bent over, resting his hands on his knees. I kept my arm back, waiting.

“Jesus Christ, Ash. What have we gotten into here?”

I focused on him, searching his mind for any trace of Murdock, making sure this wasn’t a trick. It was only Drew in there.

“We’re up Shit Creek without a paddle. Where are you parked?”

Drew looked around the empty block. “In a garage around the corner.”

“Good. Let’s—”

The display window of a craft shop beside us shattered. The crack of a rifle echoed through the street. Three more cops worked their way down the sidewalk, firing from fifty yards away.

I grabbed the lapel on Drew’s jacket and pulled him in front of a parked truck. Bullets punched holes in the body as we sunk down by the grill.

“Can you run?” I asked.

“I think so.” He grabbed his pistol.

I peeked through the windshield. They were closing the distance between us. “I’ll lay down some suppressing fire. You take off. I’ll be right behind you.”

“That won’t work. If that guy is controlling them, they won’t hide when you start shooting. He doesn’t care if they get hurt.”

The cops kept coming. Their accuracy would improve by the second. We just had to lead them a little further from Murdock, and they would be free of his grasp.

I ducked down again, tensing my muscles to run. “You know what Jack Burton says at a time like this?”

“Are you really going to quote *Big Trouble in Little China* right now?”

“Jack always says, ‘What the hell’.” I pushed off the bumper and sprinted across the street.

## 14 - Waiting for the Bus

Murdock felt The Bridge dissipate.

Asher Benson had escaped. The joy of the chaos inside had kept Murdock from focusing on his mission. He'd let the mark get away.

He growled. Let his rage build.

The woman beside him sat perfectly still, streaks of mascara running down her cheeks. Murdock looked at her, his mouth contorting in disgust.

"Waiting for the bus? The world crumbles around you, and you're waiting for the bus. People are being decapitated in the streets for a war that you support. A war you know nothing about. But you support the troops, correct? You have a ribbon magnet on the back of your car, and you think that constitutes support. You claim to have their interests at heart, yet you argue for them to be sent into harm's way."

He glared at the space where his ring finger should have been. "You sit on your couch and watch the news and think you know what's going on. You give opinions on subjects you can't possibly comprehend. I loathe you. I shall destroy you."

She didn't understand what he was talking about, but he didn't care. At that moment, she encapsulated all of his hate—his fury. Her peaceful life stood in stark contrast to the horrors he'd endured. She had nothing and everything to do with his misery.

The woman would pay, like all the rest.

The gunshots inside the police station died down.

Brakes squealed from down the street as the bus approached. Murdock urged the driver to mash the gas pedal to the floor.

The woman rose from the bench. She walked to the front of the police station and turned around, facing the street. Her muscles quivered as she fought against his control.

*No, please... so scared... why... dear God protect me...*

The bus swerved from the street, crushing the front end of a small Honda. It hopped the curb, jostling those onboard. The passengers cried out. Most thought

the driver was suffering a heart attack or an aneurism.

A garbage can crashed off the tall grill, clattering away, trash covering the sidewalk.

The bus accelerated even more.

The woman blubbered in Murdock's mind as it approached.

He stood and looked over his shoulder at a camera perched atop a pole at the nearest intersection.

Said, "Pretty maids all in a row."

The bus pierced the front of the police station, driving ten yards deep before coming to a halt. Two of the passengers flew through the windshield.

The woman's pulverized body was amid the rubble.

Murdock made the decoy rise from the bench and cross the street. He watched the camera through the man's eyes, ensuring that he was still in the frame.

An Escalade drove toward the man, the driver looking at the accident and not the road. Murdock forced the man to step in front of the grill at the last second. He released the man's mind and watched as the SUV plowed into him at forty-five miles an hour.

The wig flew from the man's head as the vehicle rumbled over him.

Murdock stood from the bench on the other side of the street and walked away.

It would take the government quite a while to figure out that body in the street wasn't him. The security around his next objective would loosen if they assumed he was dead.

He focused on negating his limp as he rounded a corner and disappeared down a side street.



## 15 - Bromance

Drew floored the accelerator as we exited the ramp and merged onto I-95 North.

Traffic was heavy as it always was in the afternoon.

Drew steered onto the shoulder, not slowing. Rumble strips vibrated the car. Pissed-off drivers honked at us as we sped past.

The cops had stopped chasing us before we got to the garage. They'd collapsed in the street, sobs racking their bodies. We hadn't stopped to console them.

Thoughts from the people in the cars filled my head as we drove by. They flitted in and out as they skirted the edges of my telepathic range. My defenses were crumbling by the minute. Soon I would be little more than a blubbering pile in the passenger seat.

The bleeding from my hand had lessened. I inspected the gash. It was nearly two inches long, the bones of my knuckles exposed.

"You've got some serious fucking explaining to do." Drew hammered on the horn to get cars out of the way. "Who the hell is this Murdock guy, and how did he almost make me kill you?"

"I'll tell you everything, but you've got to get me away from all of these people first." I put my thumbs against my temples and pushed, hoping to alleviate some of the building pressure.

"You're hearing everyone's thoughts? I thought that didn't start until the evening?"

"It's been a long day."

Drew took the next exit. He drove through a red light at the end of the ramp and swerved onto a small, two-lane road. The buildings grew sparse after a few miles, and the thunder in my head abated.

"We need to find a hotel," Drew said. "I could feel that crazy bastard poking around in my head. He knows where both of us live."

"What was it like having him in the driver's seat?"

A shiver ran through him. "Terrifying. Hopeless. Like someone holding you underwater, and there's nothing you can do about it." He rubbed his forehead

again. "I owe you for slamming my face off that bar."

"You were going to shoot me. Suck it up."

"Murdock was going to shoot you."

"Same difference."

Drew pulled into the parking lot of a hotel. Cars filled most of the spaces. He drove around the back and found a spot behind a dumpster, concealing his car from most of the building.

"There are too many people here. I won't be able to keep them out of my head for long." I eyed the windows wearily. The idea of fighting against several dozen people's thoughts filled me with dread.

"Don't worry about it, Ashley. I'll get us a couple of brews to drink while we figure this whole thing out."

I reached for the door handle when Drew grabbed my shoulder. He looked at his blood-covered suit.

"Thanks for dragging me out of there. For getting me away from *him*. He was going to make me do awful things."

"I'm sorry I got you involved in all of this. I didn't know who else to call when I was in the cemetery. Thanks for coming to get me."

We sat in silence for a few moments, each thinking of the things we'd experienced.

"You aren't going to kiss me, are you?" I asked. "I know how sexy I am, but I really feel that would dampen our friendship."

"Aren't you just hilarious?"

"I try."

"Maybe you could try to take a goddamn shower when we get in the room. I can actually taste the stench coming off you." His phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at the screen. "It's Melissa."

Drew had been dating a fourth grade teacher for the past two months. Things were more serious between them than he wanted to admit. He'd been staying overnight at her apartment for the past week, though he hadn't told me that.

I tried my best not to see in his head, had promised him that I wouldn't, but sometimes I couldn't help it. Things just popped in there.

Melissa hated me. The resentment stemmed from several points of contention, not the least of which was the amount of time Drew spent with me. She also thought I was a cocky, abrasive mooch. Because my income consisted entirely of disability checks, she saw me as little more than a government leech. She didn't seem to understand that I qualified for disability because I was injured while fighting in a war.

I also took issue with her labeling me as cocky and abrasive.

I preferred to think I was charming. If you didn't like it, then you could kiss my ass. What was abrasive about that?

Drew had no idea that I knew she hated me. He probably should have figured it out, considering my telepathy.

"Not going to answer?" I asked.

"I can't. Whatever it is that you've gotten me into, I can't have her involved." He slid his thumb across the screen and sent the call to voicemail. "I can't call anyone. Murdock just wiped out an entire police department. If we go to my station, and he follows us..."

Drew let the sentence hang between us. He turned to me. "Tell me what happened. How did you wind up in a cemetery with that monster?"

I told him everything. Smith, Murdock, McArthur. By the time I finished, the reality of our situation sank in even more. We were in quicksand, and I had no idea how to dig us out.

"They drugged you in the middle of the street?"

"Yup. Right in front of Sammy too."

"The feds are ballsy, but that's taking it really far. I think you're onto something with this Smith guy not being what he seems. You said you memorized the address of the building. What was it?"

He jotted it down as I told him.

"I'll see what I can find on him. I can remotely log into our system at work, but if anyone is looking for us, they'll be able to track us to the computer." He drummed his hands on the steering wheel. "Why isn't the government turning over every stone as they search for Murdock? The guy killed a senator, his family, wiped out a police department, and murdered an entire floor of computer hackers. You'd think the country would be under martial law by now."

I shrugged. "Why did they only send six guys after Murdock in the cemetery? The whole thing stinks to me. They said I was the only one who could help them find him, yet they let me sit in a jail cell. What sense does that make?"

A couple walked out of the back of the hotel, hand in hand. They strolled to their car in the carefree afterglow of sex. Their thoughts floated to me as they lazily drove away. I hadn't intended to eavesdrop.

My mind was even more fatigued than I'd realized.

"I need some alcohol."

"You need a shower too."

"Fine. Just get me a room, and I'll take a shower while you get me some beer."

Drew got out of the car. Said, "I can't believe I'm on the run from a mind-controlling spy with a guy who plans on getting shitfaced tonight."

I gave him a dismissive gesture. “Talk to me about my problems when you spend an entire night listening to a guy fantasize about his stepdaughter, all right?”

We walked around to the front of the hotel and into the lobby. The concierge did a double take when he watched us stroll over to the front desk. He was tall and thin. His hair was parted on the right side, covering the balding top of his head in a comb over the likes of which I hadn’t seen since Bill Murray in *Kingpin*.

His eyes roamed over the blood on Drew’s suit, the cut on my hand, and the tear in my shirt.

“What? Is my fly open?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, sir?”

Drew nudged me in the ribs. They were still sore, and it hurt like hell. I tried to play it off like everything was cool, but I felt like crying.

“We need a room.” Drew pulled his wallet from his back pocket.

“On the top floor, if you can,” I said.

Drew looked at me. “Why?”

“So I can’t *hear* the people going in and out of the lobby.” I opened my eyes as wide as I could, trying to give him an ‘Are you dense?’ kind of look.

“Our hotel is very solidly built, sir. You won’t be able to hear—”

“Just give us a room on the top floor.”

He huffed and typed into the keyboard in front of him, looking down at a monitor. He paused a few seconds later. His nostrils flared a few times.

“Smells, doesn’t he?” Drew asked.

The concierge kept typing as if he hadn’t heard anything, but the corner of his mouth curled slightly. I bit my tongue. It was taking a lot of concentration to keep the thoughts of the residents above us at bay.

Drew paid in cash. We had our keycards and were in the elevator a few minutes later. Our room was on the sixth floor, at the end of the hall. A cart with a few bags in it sat outside a room three doors down from ours.

*—the hell is she doing in there, anyway? I swear to God, if we get stuck in traffic again, because she—*

I focused on blocking the voice out as we passed by the room.

Because it was still relatively early in the day for hotel check-ins, there were only a couple of occupants on our floor and the one beneath us. The lower floors had more people, but the majority of them were out of my range. The weight pressing in on me lessened a bit.

Drew stood at the door. “I’m going to look for a liquor store. You need to wash the stank off your ass.”

I peeled my shirt off. And I did mean peeled. It clung to my skin like Saran wrap. I probably could have stood it against the wall. “Hooah. Don’t use your credit card, or they’ll be able to find us.”

“I’m the detective, remember? You focus on soap and shampoo, and I’ll take care of the rest.” He stepped into the hall and looked back at me. “I’m going to make a few calls to people I can trust. See if they can find out more about this Smith character.”

“Bring me the alcohol before you get into anything too deep. My head is going to explode *Scanners* style if too many more people check in here.”

Drew left.

I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. I wasn’t a pretty sight.

Dried blood dotted my checks. A yellowing bruise covered most of my chest. My hand looked like I’d stuck it in a wood chipper. My hair stood on end.

It took all I had not to scream when I stepped into the hot shower. The pain in my hand was almost more than I could bear. I was no stranger to taking a beating, but this was over the top.

The agony abated as I stood there for several minutes. Steam filled the room. The heat worked its way into my muscles, loosening them. I stayed under the spray until my skin turned red. The water swirling in the bottom of the tub had a pink tinge.

I scrubbed my lacerated knuckles with soap, biting back more screams.

When I stepped out, I felt quite a bit better. The aches and pains of the multiple fights I’d slogged through had dulled, and I felt refreshed.

A first-aid kit was under the sink. Three butterfly bandages closed the wound on my hand. I wrapped it with a few layers of gauze to keep it clean. Brushed my teeth with my finger and a bit of toothpaste.

I didn’t have any clean clothes to change into, so I tied a towel around my waist and poked my head into the hall. It was still clear. The cart full of bags hadn’t moved.

I sneaked down the hall, tiptoeing on the worn carpet. Because of my height and relatively small waist, it was hard to find clothes in a store that fit me perfectly. Everything long enough usually had a wide waist. Damned fat-ass Americans.

The zipper on the top bag was stuck, so I moved it aside and worked on the next one. Inside were a couple of pairs of khakis and golf shirts. I took one of each and moved onto the third bag. It was full of women’s clothing.

A pen fell from the last bag and rolled under the cart. I didn’t bother fetching it.

Quietly, I closed everything back up and went back to my room. I didn't have fresh underwear or socks, but I would have to make do. Going commando in another man's pants didn't particularly appeal to me.

Wearing shoes without socks wasn't the most pleasant experience either.

I smirked at myself as I closed the door to the room behind me. Weird things bothered me. I'd shot someone today. Fought the Brady Bunch. Ran from a murdering monster. Been arrested and escaped. But a needle in my shoulder and a lack of underwear *really* irked me.

Maybe I should see a therapist.

I dropped the towel and pulled the pants on.

"Son of a bitch."

The pants had an extra foot around the waist. The cuffs on the bottom of the khakis stopped a few inches above my ankles. Who had I stolen these clothes from, Danny DeVito?

I grabbed the blue shirt and pulled it on. My pants fell down around my ankles when I let go of the waist.

The shirt was extremely tight around my chest and arms and loose around my stomach. It stopped at my belly button.

"This guy has a build like a pear." I bent down and grabbed the pants again.

I went out in the hallway again to search the bags for a belt, but the cart was gone. Standing in front of the door, the bottom part of my stomach exposed, I held my pants up with one hand. If anyone walked by, they'd think they were on a hidden camera show.

The first-aid kit had a small pair of scissors in it. I used them to cut a strip from my towel. The fabric went through the loops in my pants, acting as a makeshift belt. I tied it in a knot in the front like a shoestring.

Fabric from the pants bunched together against my hips.

My appearance in the mirror was so ridiculous that I couldn't help but chuckle. Laughing hurt my ribs and face, but I did it anyway. I looked like some kind of strip-club reject. The way the clothing fit reminded me of Tom Hanks in *Big*.

Drew would never let me live this one down.

There was no refrigerator in the room, so I took a long drink from the faucet. It tasted like water from a swimming pool, but I needed to rehydrate, especially if I was going to chug beer soon.

I collapsed into the bed. Grabbed the television remote.

My face was plastered all over the news. Great.

The talking heads were going apeshit. An entire police department had turned on one another. The headlines scrolling across the bottom of the screen

promised that the president would give an address on the issue soon. Two of the commentators squared off, shouting over one another. The man on the left, a sour-faced, bald-headed man of seventy slammed his hand on the table.

*“—question no one is asking is whether this event is tied to the mass suicide that happened at the Cyber Crimes Center! What about the suicide of Senator McArthur? Are you going to sit there and tell me that these are unrelated? How could so many massive, catastrophic events happen in one day?”*

Another man, much younger with dark hair and the thick-rimmed glasses that were the current rage, pointed back at Sour Face.

*“How could these possibly be related? They have nothing to do with each other. What does a shooting at a police station have to do with people committing suicide? You’re a conspiracy-theory nut job. It’s an embarrassment that I even have to sit here and listen to this garbage.”*

I switched to another station. Drew’s bald mug popped up, overlaying video from the police station.

It was a long shot of the hallway we’d escaped from. The video showed me dragging Drew along. It cut away before I shot the cop.

*“We believe that the man being abducted is Detective Andrew Lloyd. A statewide manhunt has ensued for Detective Lloyd and Asher Benson. If you have any information on the whereabouts of—”*

I looked up at the ceiling. “I’m so screwed.”

Then I felt the presence of someone coming down the hallway, heading toward my door.

It was a mind that I couldn’t read.

A mind protected against my ability.

One of Smith’s men.

## 16 - The Main Event

I rolled off the bed and ran to the other side of the room.

The person stood just outside the door. The fact that they knew I was here didn't bode well for me. We hadn't told anyone where we were holed up.

I flattened my back against the wall beside the door and waited.

Nothing happened for nearly ten seconds.

The mind remained blank to me, its defenses too strong for me to penetrate.

Then the door burst inward, the jam splintering.

A flash of a boot was visible for a second before disappearing back into the hallway.

A man rushed inside, pistol first. It was massive, more akin to a cannon than a handgun. It looked like a Desert Eagle, but I'd never seen one in person so I couldn't be sure. The end had a silencer attached to it.

In a flash, I grabbed the barrel of the gun and twisted, catching the man's finger in the trigger guard.

The pistol fired, the sound louder than I would have expected from a silenced gun. It bucked in my hands. The window on the other side of the room exploded outward.

The man didn't cry out even as I heard the crunch of his finger breaking.

I pulled the pistol from his grip and spun into the doorway.

The Man in Black stood before me. He who liked to jab needles into my shoulder. Smith's right-hand man. His face was an expressionless canvas. If he was concerned that I'd gotten the drop on him, he didn't show it.

I raised the gun to aim at his chest, but he shifted his weight and batted my hands to the side before I could even see how he'd done it. The pistol flew down the hallway, sliding on the thin carpet.

He moved with mind-blowing speed. My head rocked back as he hit me with a jab that I never saw coming.

A growl escaped my throat as I dove into him, driving his back into the opposite wall of the hallway. I threw an elbow at his face, but he ducked out of the way and I struck the wall.



He kicked at the back of my knee, buckling my weight.

I fell to the floor, but recovered quickly and rolled away as he threw a sidekick at my face. I hopped up, five feet away, and squared off with him.

We stood in the middle of the hall, two bulls preparing to lock horns.

I rolled the shoulder he'd jammed the needle into. "I've been looking forward to this moment all day."

The Man in Black raised his hands to chest height. His eyes remained locked on mine.

The index finger on his right hand canted sideways between the first two knuckles.

He grabbed it with his free hand and yanked it back into place. No emotion on his face. Not a hint of pain.

"I'm going to do that to your neck." I started forward, raising my hands and tucking my chin. "Time for the main event."

He cracked his neck and stood in place, waiting for me to close the distance.

When I was five feet away, he pivoted on his lead foot and spun around, catching me in the stomach with a spinning back kick. The move was so explosive, so fluid, that I didn't have a chance to get out of the way.

The air whooshed from my lungs as I staggered back. It took all of my strength and willpower to stay on my feet.

A small smirk cracked his veneer as he waded forward. He didn't bother protecting his head with his hands. Complete disdain for my fighting ability showed in his every movement.

I was no threat to him, and he knew it.

My back hit another door and I leaned against it for a second, focusing on getting a breath. You couldn't fight if you couldn't breathe. That was why my boxing coach always emphasized body shots.

"You think you're so fucking cool, don't you?" He walked me down, sneering at my pain.

I wanted to retort, but talking was a bit difficult for me at the time.

He threw another kick, this time at my face. I barely ducked out of the way in time. His foot splintered the door, breaking the frame and lock. It popped open, banging against the inside wall.

A door down the hall opened, and an elderly woman stuck her head out. "What's going on?"

I forced a deep breath, said, "Get back inside!"

The man stalked toward me again.

Fighting the average person was easy for me because I could read their mind. That didn't apply to professional fighters though. They reacted on instinct,

without forethought or planning for the most part. There wasn't time for me to process what they wanted to do and beat them to the punch.

This guy was both a skilled fighter and a blank canvas to me. His mind was blocked off, and I doubted he spent much time formulating a game plan to take me out. He didn't have to.

I threw a feint with my left and put everything I had into a right hook.

He ducked it with ease before driving a knee into my ribs.

The blow knocked me to my ass. It felt like I had a hole in my chest.

I crab-walked backward on my hands, needing to put distance between us. His shots were tearing me up, and I knew that I couldn't take many more of them.

He kept coming. "Nothing funny to say, smart guy? No quips?" He stomped on my left knee.

The pain almost made me pass out. Colors swam in my vision, glowing swirls of neon.

I grabbed at the joint, grunting and rolling to my side. The bottom half of my leg burned.

Something on the floor jabbed into my shoulder.

The pen that had fallen from the bag.

The Man in Black grabbed the collar of my shirt and pulled me to a seated position. He leaned over, sneering into my face.

"Pathetic. For all your bluster, you're nothing."

I mumbled, purposely keeping my voice low. My hand wrapped around the pen behind me. I pulled the cap off with my fingers and let it fall to the carpet.

He leaned closer. "What?"

"Let me show you what I think of those sissy kicks."

I jammed the pen into the side of his neck.

He gagged and jerked away, reeling several steps backward.

My knee throbbed as I struggled back to my feet. The elevator whirled behind me as it rose toward our floor. I hobbled for it, hoping the doors would open before I got there.

The gun rested a few feet away, lying in the middle of the hall by the elevator.

I glanced over my shoulder when I was halfway there.

The man grabbed the pen and slowly pulled it free. Blood ran from the hole in his neck, soaking into the collar of his white shirt.

"You might want to disinfect that," I said. "I found the pen on the floor."

He threw it against the wall and came for me again.

The elevator dinged. The doors opened. A rotund, red-faced man stood in the corner. He took a step forward to exit the elevator when he spotted me. His eyes went wide, and he pressed back against the wall.

I scooped up the gun and turned around, slowed by my already-swelling knee. The Desert Eagle had a heft that surprised me. Its weight felt closer to that of a shotgun than a pistol.

The man speared me at the waist in a tackle that lifted me from my feet and drove us into the elevator.

My back crashed against the wall beside the frightened man in the corner.

Black Suit grabbed my wrist and slammed it off the metal railing in the middle of the wall. The gun fell from my grasp as a new bolt of pain ran into my forearm.

The doors closed behind us. We descended.

I threw a short left that caught him in the temple. He ate it like a pancake.

Kicked me in the same knee.

I fell to the floor, instinct making me reach for the damaged joint.

He grabbed a handful of my hair and slammed my face off the railing.

I slumped against the wall. My limbs were sluggish and unresponsive. Face throbbed. Knee ached. Equilibrium shot.

“Hey! Leave him alone!” The man in the corner finally reacted. He reached out to grab the shoulder of Smith’s goon.

He took a ridge-hand chop to the throat for his troubles.

The chubby man fell into the corner, sliding down to the floor. His eyes darted around wildly. His fingers groped at his neck as gags escaped his clenched teeth.

The Man in Black turned his attention back to me.

My senses had come back somewhat, but I played possum. I slowly moved my eyes up his body. Blood ran over my lips and teeth as it poured from my nose. I let it flow, acting like I didn’t have the strength to wipe it away.

I couldn’t beat him in a fight on our feet. I had one more trick up my sleeve.

“Some great soldier.” He reached for the pistol. “You were right about one thing—you didn’t deserve that Service Cross. They wasted that medal on your pathetic ass.”

My hand snaked out and grabbed onto his wrist. I pulled him down on top of me as I lifted my hips.

My right leg looped around his neck, bending at the knee. I pulled him down further until his wrist was close to my head. My damaged knee bent over the ankle of my right leg, cinching in a triangle choke.

Exquisite pain ran into my quad and hamstring from the bad knee. My body quivered as I fought against the agony. If I didn't stop the man there, he would execute me and then move on to Drew.

I squeezed my legs together as hard as I could. My fingers laced behind his head and I pulled it down, applying more pressure to his neck.

The move restricted blood flow to the brain. I'd submitted many of my grappling partners in jiu-jitsu class with it, but I'd never put it on someone in a real-life situation before.

The man thrashed around as he tried to pull his head and arm free.

I squeezed even harder.

His free hand grabbed onto the trapped one. He stood up, lifting me from the floor even as I remained attached to his head and shoulders.

I knew what was coming next. I'd seen it done to a few guys in the UFC before.

Braced myself.

He slammed me down to the floor again. A spasm ran through my back from the blow. The only thing that kept me from being knocked unconscious was the other man in the elevator.

The back of my head landed on his leg, softening the blow.

I clenched my teeth and put what little strength I had left into the hold. Blood gushed from my nose, staining the golf shirt I'd stolen. Red spittle flew from my mouth as I took ragged breaths.

The Man in Black punched at my legs and chest. His movements grew sluggish. Each blow was weaker than the last. His eyes fluttered.

If we were in class, he would have tapped by now.

His body slumped against me. His legs gave out and his ass thumped to the floor, shaking the elevator.

More than anything, I wanted to maintain the hold, to starve his brain of blood and oxygen until it killed him. As much as I desired it, I wasn't a murderer.

I let it go, grimacing at the pain in my knee. It was already starting to stiffen and swell. The pants tightened around it.

I kicked him away and rolled toward the man in the corner.

He'd stopped moving. I checked his pulse, found it steady. The throat chop hadn't killed him, but it had done some internal damage. His throat was darkening as I watched it. The man needed medical attention.

The Man in Black's eyes fluttered. A groan escaped him.

The problem with choking people unconscious is that they wake up a few seconds later when blood returns to their brain.

A swift heel to his chin solved that issue.

I flopped onto my back and stared at the ceiling, feeling every blow that had hit me that day.

The elevator dinged. The doors opened.

Four people stood in the lobby of the hotel, waiting to go up to their rooms.

They gaped at the carnage in the elevator. Bodies and blood covered the floor.

I gave them a crimson smile. “Going up?”

## 17 - A Couple of Boo-Boos

The beating I'd suffered had severely limited my ability to blot out other people's thoughts.

*Holy shit! It's a massacre in there!*

*What's going on?*

*Is that the guy I saw on the news?*

*Why is he dressed like that?*

I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on each voice. Their volume went down to a manageable level after a few seconds.

The doors to the elevator started to close so I stuck my foot between them.

The young couple I'd watched leave from the back walked across the lobby. They stopped ten feet away from me. The girl gasped and raised a hand to her mouth. The boy pulled a phone from his pocket.

I thought he was going to call for an ambulance, but he started recording video instead. Why did there have to be a stupid camera on every phone?

"Can someone help me out here?" I looked around the group, but no one moved. "Pretty please? With sugar on top?"

The concierge ran over from the front desk. "What's going on here?" He spotted my bloody visage, and the color drained from his face. "Are you all right?"

"I've been better. I have a couple of boo-boos." I held my hand out for him to grab.

"What happened to you?" He helped me to my feet, careful not to get any of my blood on his suit.

I hocked a mouthful of red-tinged spit onto the floor. More blood flowed into my mouth from my smashed nose. The girl beside Mr. Cameraman grimaced.

"I cut myself shaving." I pointed at the throat-chop victim in the elevator. "Call for an ambulance. That guy might have a broken larynx." I kicked the Man in Black in the ribs. "Get the cops here for this piece of shit."

The Desert Eagle went into my waistband. The young couple whispered to each other when they saw the gun.

My eyes scanned the lobby in search of more of Smith's men. I couldn't afford another fight. My body was shutting down already.

*Can't believe how much the porn costs in this place. To hell with this, I'm getting on the internet.*

*It's OK to drink rum and diet coke because it has no carbs, right?*

*Nice of them to give me a view of the highway. So glad we spent extra for the suite. I'm going to give that smarmy dickhead behind the counter a piece of my*

---

I leaned against the concierge as more thoughts filtered in. The dull roar grew louder.

Drew walked in the front door, a brown bag in his right hand. He stopped a few feet into the lobby when he saw me standing there. "Do I even want to ask?"

"Smith sent one of his jackals." I bobbed my head at the elevator again. "We had a disagreement."

"It looks like he disagreed all over your face."

"And my knee." I released my hold on the concierge's shoulder.

Drew pulled his piece from its holster. The crowd gasped and shrank away from him.

"I'm a detective. Everyone relax."

I hobbled my way across the lobby.

The kid filmed me the entire way.

I looked right into the small lens, gave it a bloody smile. "Remember that only you can prevent forest fires."

Drew met me halfway. "Forest fires? Why the hell did you say that?"

"Seemed pithy at the time."

"Seemed stupid."

"I have a traumatic brain injury—shut up. Help me get out of here. If Smith sent that guy after me, there's no telling who else is around." My knee continued to swell as we made it out to the parking lot. I kept one of my hands on Drew's shoulder, letting him deal with some of my weight.

The heel of my free hand pressed against my temple. The pressure between my ears made my head feel like the top was about to blow off.

"I'm afraid of the answer, but why are you dressed like you're about to go on stage for ladies' night?" Drew led me to the right. He'd moved his car to the front of the building for some reason.

"I stole clothes from the people in the room beside ours."

"They fit you well."

A few people followed us outside. Mr. Cameraman kept recording us as we walked through the parking lot.

“Ash, I made a few calls and—”

I pointed at the brown bag in his hand, cutting him off. “What’s in the bag?”

“Bottle of Jack. I couldn’t find any—”

I grabbed it and tore the paper bag away. Took a long pull. Pleasant warmth ran through my throat and stomach.

“The noise getting bad?” Drew asked.

“Can barely think straight. That guy back there came to kill me. Something is—”

I’d just opened the passenger side door to Drew’s car when another thought stream hit me.

*What? Holy shitballs!*

I recognized the inner voice, the pattern of speech. It was the child-woman I’d met outside of Smith’s.

Drew saw my hesitation. “What is it?”

“Someone else I met with Smith is here.” I let my eyes roam around the parking lot.

It was full of nondescript cars. Except for one. A black SUV parked by the entrance.

I tipped the bottle at it. “She’s in there.”

*I’ve got to get the fuck out of here. Goddamn psycho assholes are going—*

“Better hurry, she’s going to run.”

Drew kept his piece held in front of him as he ran back to the vehicle. “Out of the car!”

*Fuck balls!*

“Keep your hands where I can see them.” Drew walked around to the passenger side, aiming through the windshield.

I hobbled over, taking another sip from the bottle. I’d have to pace myself with the hard stuff, or I’d be completely useless soon. With the way the rest of my day had gone, I had a feeling that there was more bullshit on the horizon for us.

Drew tore the door open. His face scrunched when he saw the tiny person inside. “It’s just a kid.”

“I’m not a kid, you baldheaded dick bag. Get that fucking gun out of my face.”

“It’s a kid with a really foul mouth.” Drew lowered the pistol. “Get out of the car.”

“I said I’m not a kid. Are you hard of hearing, baldy?” Nami had to climb out of the SUV backward. Her short legs made it look like she was scaling down a monster truck.



I waited by the front of the vehicle, caressing the bottle. The stiffness in my knee kept me from walking any further than necessary. The pinch behind my eyes loosened a bit as the alcohol took hold.

Drew cocked an eyebrow as he looked down at her. "I'm just a little confused here."

"I'm sure that isn't unusual for you." Nami came around to the front of the car, turning her attention to me. "I had no idea he was going to try to kill you. I swear, I just figured out what he was going to do when he went inside."

I tried to focus on her, to access her memories, but there was too much background noise from the people in the hotel. Too many emotions around us. Even still, I remembered how little she knew when we'd met outside of Smith's office.

"You just figured it out? How?"

"I hacked into his phone."

I took another sip. "Bring her with us."

"Where are we going?" Drew asked.

"Anywhere but here."

Nami said, "I'm not going anywhere with you guys. This morning I went into work like any other day, and now I'm stuck in the middle of some crazy ass \_\_\_\_"

Drew grabbed the back of her shirt and dragged her forward.

"Let go of you me, you big oaf!" She kicked him in the shin.

Drew scowled down at her. "You shouldn't kick people with guns."

"I'll shove that gun up your ass."

"For a ninety-pound girl, you sure are feisty." He yanked her forward again.

"At least let me get my laptop and that dude's phone."

Sirens came from the highway.

"Get your stuff," I said. "But hurry up. We have to be out of here before the cops arrive." I looked at Drew. "There's a warrant out for me. They think I kidnapped you."

"I heard."

Nami and Drew went back to the SUV. He grabbed a backpack, laptop, and cell phone.

"Hey, they're abducting that little girl!" Mr. Cameraman looked around at the other spectators as if he expected them to stop us. No one moved.

Nami's fists balled. "The next one of you morons who calls me a little girl is going to get their ass kicked."

Drew steered the car out of the parking lot a moment later. We drove east toward Baltimore, though we weren't going anywhere in particular. At some

point, we would have to ditch his car before a camera picked up his license plate. Drew avoided toll roads so the booths couldn't take our picture.

The overwhelming voices died down a bit, but I still struggled every time we passed a group of cars or a bus.

"Nancy Williams, this is Drew Lloyd," I said over my shoulder.

"It's Nami."

"Whatever."

"Not whatever. Call me by my actual name." She looked at Drew. "And it isn't a pleasure to meet you. I'm getting really tired of people jerking me around today. First, all of my coworkers killed themselves for no goddamn reason. Second, I had to meet with that Smith douche and then his flunky is driving me all over the place as we look for you. Third, you've kidnapped me, and I don't even know what you want."

Drew gave her a little salute. "Dealing with you hasn't exactly made my day either."

"You were thinking that Smith's guys back there were psychopaths. Why?" I asked Nami.

She stared at me. *No way.*

"Yes way," I said.

She pushed back into her seat, unconsciously putting distance between us.

*You can read my mind? You know what I'm thinking?*

"Yes."

Drew peered at me from the corner of his eye. "What?"

We both ignored him.

*Blue.*

"Blue."

*Dogs are cute.*

"I like German Shepherds."

*Holy shit!*

"You might want to see a doctor if your shit is holy."

A string of slurs and disbelief ran through her head.

"You sound like a lunatic right now," Drew said. "I know what you're doing, but all I'm hearing is your side of this conversation." He looked at Nami in the rearview mirror. "Care to fill me in on who you are?"

Nami kept her attention on me. "Impossible."

"Natalie is a computer dork. She worked at the DC3 building on the floor where everyone jumped from the windows," I said.

"My name is Nami!"

"If you were in that building, why aren't you dead too?" Drew asked.

“I was on a different floor when it happened.” She kept staring at me. “How is this possible? They told me that you could hear people’s thoughts, but I didn’t believe it.”

“Don’t ask me. I bumped my head a few years ago, and now I’m stuck in a car with you while federal agents chase us.”

“Let me out,” Nami said. “This is too much.”

Drew finally pulled off the main road we were heading down and took a smaller one. Relief washed over me as we drove further away.

“We can’t do that. Not until you answer some questions first.” I took another shot from the bottle.

*Fuck it. I’ll just open the door and jump out.*

“Speed up, Drew. She’s thinking about jumping out.”

Drew pushed the accelerator down.

*Get out of my head, you asshole.*

“I can’t. Normally I can control it, but I’ve had a rough day.”

“Why don’t you just look at her memories and get what we need?” Drew asked.

“I’m trying, but I can’t focus. The booze is quieting everything, but it’s screwing with my ability to concentrate on one voice.”

“You guys are sitting up there, talking about mind fucking me like it’s no big deal.”

I turned around so I could face her. The movement hurt my ribs and chest like hell. “Believe me, the last thing I want is to be in your head. You like some really weird stuff.”

“Then let me go.”

“We will, as soon as you tell us what you know. How did you find us?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. “How do I know that I can trust you? I can’t tell who is lying to me and who is actually trying to do the right thing. They told me about some Murdock asshole and all the terrible things he was doing, but then they tried to kill you. And then...”

She let the last sentence trail off.

I caught a hint of her thoughts, but my lack of focus didn’t let me hold onto it. She was thinking something about a list.

“Maybe this will help.” I took the Desert Eagle from its spot in my waistband and handed it back to her.

She stared at it. “Is this a trick?”

“What are you doing?” Drew asked. “Don’t give her a goddamn gun.”

“She won’t hurt us,” I said. “I saw into her head earlier today. She’s a good person. Grating and vulgar as hell, but she’s moral.” I bobbed the pistol. “Take

it.”

She grabbed the handle, having to use both of her tiny hands because of the size and weight of it. She studied it for several seconds as she weighed her options. I caught pieces of her thoughts, enough to get the gist of her struggles.

I capped the bottle and put it on the floor. As much as I wanted to drown everything out, I needed the use of my ability until we were safe. I’d have to suffer for a while longer.

“I found an email from Smith to the guy in the black suit while you were in the hotel.” She held his phone up. “He left this on the seat when he went inside.”

“Why would he leave his phone in the car with you in there?” Drew asked. “That’s just stupid.”

“It has 256-bit encryption. It would take me weeks to break into it, and that’s if I had access to my tools at the office. He probably thought no one could get into it.” She shrugged. “And maybe he didn’t actually *leave* it on the seat, so much as I pulled it from his pocket and hid it until he left.”

I liked her style. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I didn’t have a good feeling about them. I’ve dealt with some shady assholes since I started working for the government, but these guys were worse than usual.”

Drew looked at her in the mirror again. “If the phone is so advanced, how did you manage to get into it?”

“Our friend back there has an especially greasy face. I followed the unlock pattern his finger smeared on the screen. It was a triangle.” She gave me a big smile. “Nailed it.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup.”

“Can we skip the back patting for a bit? What did the email say?” I asked.

*Dick.*

I waited.

Nami pursed her lips, said, “The email had four names in it. They were listed for termination.”

“I’m guessing your name was on it.”

“It said to take me back to my apartment and make it look like a suicide so it would fit in with the pattern of my co-workers. Your name was on it too.”

I rubbed my sore knee. “No shit. What I don’t understand is why?”

“No idea. I had just found the list when you two knuckleheads walked by the SUV. Ten seconds earlier and I would have been gone.”

Wanting to kill Nami didn’t make any sense to me. Then again, I didn’t know why they’d come after me. The two of us were trying to help them. We’d both

encountered Murdock too, so we understood the importance of what they were doing.

Why get rid of us?

“You said there were four names in the email—what were the last two?”

Nami unlocked the phone. “One of them is your baldheaded butt buddy.”

Drew’s shoulders tensed. “Me? Why would they want to kill me?” His grip on the steering wheel tightened until his knuckles went white.

“The last name is Samantha Moore. There’s a Baltimore address listed beside it.”

“Sammy?” I asked. “The woman I met this morning?”

## 18 - Ashley

Drew called Melissa.

She answered on the third ring. He tried to speak two different times, but she cut him off with incessant rants.

I rolled my eyes. Damn, she was annoying.

“No, Ash didn’t kidnap me. In fact... well, yes, but... honey, no... yes, he shot that officer, but we didn’t...”

Nami made a mock pistol with her hand and mimed shooting herself in the temple.

Drew flipped her off.

“Melissa, shut the hell up.”

She fell into a stunned silence. It wasn’t often that Drew stood up to her never-ending barrage.

“Where are you right now?” he asked. “Leave. No, don’t pack a bag, just leave. Get some cash from the envelope and go to Shari’s house.”

Melissa went ballistic into the phone. Drew held it away from his ear as she ranted.

“I’ll call you when things calm down. Don’t tell anyone where you’re going, all right? OK, I love you too. I’ll call soon.” He hung up and looked over at me. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“The smug look on your face says it all.”

Nami said, “Dude, you’re seriously pussy whipped.”

“Told you. Even Naomi can see it.”

“It’s Nami, you ass.”

“Both of you need to pipe down. I don’t need relationship advice from a guy who lives like a crackhead and a foul-mouthed, sawed-off computer dork.” Drew swung the car onto a shale road and slowed down, stopping on the shoulder.

He put the car in park.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “We need to get to Sammy’s place.”

“In a minute.” Drew looked back at Nami. “How did you know we were at the hotel?”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot.” She pointed at me. “You have a microchip in your shoulder.”

I spun around and immediately regretted it. My body was basically one giant bruise. “What?”

“Did I stutter?”

My fingers massaged the spot on my shoulder where the Man in Black gave me the shot. The small bump there had a new meaning all of a sudden. I’d thought it was just a little swelling from the needle and the drug.

The bump was a little smaller than a grain of rice.

I lifted the sleeve up and showed Drew the small lump.

“Christ, they’re probably tracking us right now,” he said.

Nami opened her laptop. Her fingers blurred across the keyboard. “I don’t know how many other people they have tracking you, but I can see our car right now.”

Drew yanked the transmission back into gear. The smell of burnt rubber wafted in through the cracked windows. “We need to keep moving so they don’t catch us.”

“Do you have a knife?” I asked Drew.

“What? Please tell me you aren’t going to cut it out yourself?” Nami’s upper lip curled in disgust.

“Nah, I figured we would wait until Smith showed up, and then I would ask him to remove it.”

“Girls, you need to let me focus on driving,” Drew said. “And no, I don’t have a knife.”

“Shit.” I kept rubbing my shoulder. Bastards. “Give me your cell. I’m going to call Sammy and tell her to get out of there.”

Drew handed it over. “Her number is in the witness folder.”

I half-expected it to be under ‘Large Breasts’. “You saved her number in your phone? What would Melissa think?”

“Hey now. Sammy is a witness to a bank robbery. Nothing more.”

“Oh please. When she was outside my building, you puffed your chest out like some kind of mating display on Animal Planet.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.” I called her.

She answered before I even heard it ring. “Detective Lloyd? Did you find him?”

“It’s me, Sammy, Ash.”

“Ash? Are you all right? What happened? Who were those men? I was so scared when they took you. I thought—”

“Are you at home, Sammy?”

“What?”

Drew merged back onto the highway and floored it. The bulky engine of his car roared. We were heading back to the city. I wasn’t sure how well I could handle being around that many people, but we needed to check on Samantha.

And to cut the bug out of my shoulder.

“Are you home?”

“Yes, why?”

“Leave. Right now. Don’t ask any questions, just leave.”

She paused. I could hear her breathing. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“The men who kidnapped me this morning are coming for you right now. You need to get out of there before they arrive.”

More silence on her end. I could practically feel any chance I ever had with her slipping away. Not that I could have handled a serious relationship anyway, but just going on a single date would have been nice.

“Why would they come for me? How would they even know who I am or where I live?”

“It’s complicated.”

“You’re scaring me, Ash.”

I closed my eyes. “I’m sorry about that, I really am, but you need to get out of your apartment.”

“They’re saying that you shot a police officer, Ash. Is that—?”

The connection went dead.

“Ah, crap.”

“What?” Drew asked.

“I lost the signal.” The screen read one bar, but it kept fluctuating up and down. “Actually, we should probably throw your phone out, right? I mean, if they’re looking for us, can’t they track it?”

“They can.”

“And your car too.”

“Yeah.”

“And they’re tracking my shoulder.”

Nami leaned forward. “Just keep repeating the obvious, guys—that’ll make it all better.”

I slowly turned around, giving her my best, hardened Arnold Schwarzenegger look. “Considering you followed the signal in my arm and led a



murderer to my doorstep, you might want to keep quiet back there. Besides, we're keeping you alive right now."

"The hell you are. If you let me out right now, I'll be just fine."

"Oh really? I must have imagined your name was on that list then, right? How are you going to blend in, by the way? You're a four-foot tall, black, thirty-year-old with the mouth of a sailor. You aren't exactly suited for espionage."

"Wait a second... I'm black?" Nami inspected her hands. "Whoa! Thanks for bringing that to my attention. I feel so much safer having you around now that I know about your powers of observation." She leaned back and crossed her arms again.

*Dipshit.*

"I heard that."

"Good."

"As I was saying before we picked up Half Pint back there, I had someone look into the address you gave me," Drew said.

Nami growled, "Half Pint? You son of a—"

"And?" I asked.

"It was just renovated. Some new tech company is scheduled to move in there in a few weeks. It should be empty right now."

"Could that just be a front for Smith's agency?"

Drew lifted his hands in a 'maybe' gesture. He turned the radio on. "We're about ten minutes away from Samantha's block. We'll leave the car by her building after we grab her. Maybe she has a ride we can use."

"You're going to kidnap someone else now?" Nami laughed. "You guys can't help but dig your own graves, can you?"

"We're going to *save* someone else." I dismissed her with a wave. "If you'd encountered Murdock and Smith's goons in the ways we have, you'd be kissing my feet."

The radio bleated about the missing detective and the traumatized soldier. The DJ gave the location of the hotel we'd just left. Helicopters were taking to the skies to find us. They were calling me a cop killer.

I knew that wasn't right. I'd only wounded the man I'd shot, but that didn't stop fear from settling in the pit of my stomach. Police officers didn't have the best of reputations when it came to cop killers.

And with good reason.

When someone killed your brother, you wanted retaliation. Few could understand that better than I could. If it hadn't been for my scrambled brain, I would have spent the rest of my deployment looking for the piece of filth who shot Barker.

I still fantasized about getting my hands on him.

Having Sammy think I was walking around and shooting cops made me want to chug the bottle of Jack at my feet. She thought I was a homeless, alcoholic murderer.

Fuck my life.

The DJ talked about the deceased police officers for a little while longer before switching stories. He reported on the rash of suicides that had started earlier that morning with a prominent senator.

“We’re in a world of hurt, Ashley.” Drew switched the radio off.

“Did he just call you Ashley?” Nami hopped in her seat and clapped. It made her look all of eight years old. “That makes me so happy.”

“Stay quiet back there, Nicaragua.” I watched out the window as we passed back into Baltimore. The pressure had resumed building inside my head. It was more manageable than it had been at the hotel. Thank God for alcohol.

“Now you’re calling me the names of countries? You’re so lame.”

Horns blared from our right as we sped through a red light. A Civic almost T-boned us.

Drew kept glancing into the rearview mirror.

“What is it?” I asked.

“We have company.”

“Who?”

“Black SUV with tinted windows. Half a dozen cars back.”

I found it in my mirror a second later. They were attempting to keep enough distance between us to remain unseen. Drew had an eye for odd behavior, so it didn’t surprise me that he’d spotted them.

“Can you tell how many men are in it?” Drew asked.

“No way. There are too many people around here, and my head is still scrambled.”

Nami looked through the back window. “Great. What were you saying about keeping me safe? They’re tracking you numbskulls, and now they’ve found me.”

I grabbed the back of her shirt and pulled her down into the seat. “Keep your head down. These guys will take a shot at you if they have it.”

“Don’t wrinkle the shirt, Ashley.”

“Samantha’s building is the next block up.” Drew pointed through the windshield. “Get ready to hop out.”

“And do what?” Nami asked.

“We’re going to run inside, grab Sammy, and then escape out the back,” I said. “We’ll have to steal a car or something.”

“That’s your master plan?”

Drew nodded. “Sounds good to me. We’re on the run from the police, the federal government, and a mind-controlling psychopath. Our options are a little limited here.”

“Oh my gods. We’re going to die.”

I reached under the seat and pulled out the pistol I’d taken from the cop during our escape. I’d stashed it there when we got to the hotel.

Checked the mag.

Almost full.

“Drew,” I said. “Sorry for dragging you into this.”

“Enough of that crap. I knew this was a possibility from the moment I learned what you could do. Honestly, I’m shocked it took this long.”

“Are you guys going to kiss now?” Nami asked.

Everybody was a goddamn comedian all of a sudden.

I grabbed the bottom of my shirt and tore a swath of fabric away.

Nami leaned forward, peering over the seat. “Do I even want to know what you’re doing? You’re going to be naked by the time the day is over. Gross.”

After another quick pull from the bottle of Jack, I stuffed the fabric into the neck until the end soaked into the dark booze. The other end stuck from the opening, hanging against the label.

“You’re making a Molotov?”

“No fooling you.”

“Ready?” Drew asked. “I’m going to stop in the middle of the road to clog traffic. Hopefully that’ll give us a few seconds head start.”

Nami pulled her SpongeBob backpack on. She held the Desert Eagle in both hands. “Ready. I guess.”

I pointed at the hand cannon. “Maybe we should switch guns. If you actually shoot that thing, it’ll knock you on your ass.”

“Maybe you should kiss—”

“Let’s do this.” Drew threw the car into park and jumped out.

My knee threatened to buckle when I put weight on it, but it held and I was limping across the sidewalk as the first horns blared behind us. Drew took point, charging two-dozen yards up the block before stopping in front of a door.

Sammy’s building was a well-maintained, brick complex. It stood several stories and consumed nearly half the block. Shadows bathed the front of it as the sun eased toward the horizon.

As I shambled after Drew, I realized how long the day had actually been for me. Evening was finally approaching, and I’d already gone through a lifetime’s worth of trauma.

“Slow down! I can’t keep up with you giants.” Nami’s breathing had already grown heavy behind me. Her small legs had to work twice as hard as mine did.

“Hurry up, Short Round.” I stopped at the door beside Drew and held the Molotov out. “Have a lighter?”

“Do I smoke? Why the hell would I have a lighter?”

People shouted at us from the street as their cars idled behind Drew’s. Traffic was already backing up through the intersection down the block. The streets were filling as people left work.

Three men climbed out of the black SUV. They wore sunglasses and pissed-off expressions.

I caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and looked around for the source. A couple stood by a fire hydrant, puffing away and watching us with curiosity. They wore skinny jeans, despite the heat, and looked like a couple of hipsters to me.

The guy took a half step away as I approached them.

“Can I use your lighter for a second?”

*Great abs*, the girl thought.

I winked at her.

*Eww.*

The man adjusted the cigarette between his fingers and looked down at the Molotov in my hand. His eyes settled on the pistol I’d stuck in the front of my pants.

*What’s going on here? Why’s this dude packing?*

I held my open hand out, palm up. “Don’t make me go into your pocket for the lighter.”

“Give it to him, Robby.” The girl nudged him in the ribs. Her brown hair was pulled into a ponytail. She would have been pretty cute if she wasn’t holding a cigarette and dressed like a hipster douche.

Then again, I looked like a coked-up stripper in the middle of a bender. We all had our issues.

He fished a small, purple tube from his pocket and handed it over.

“Everything cool?”

“No. I suggest you head on down the road here. Things are about to heat up.”

I attempted to light the fabric hanging from the bottle as I walked back to Drew. The synthetic fibers didn’t want to burn, so I had to hold the flame to it for several seconds.

Nami stood inside the door, waiting in front of an elevator. The Desert Eagle was comically huge in her hands. She shook her head at me as I finally got the Molotov lit. “You’re about to do the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“You realize that throwing that in the middle of a city will have them labeling you as a terrorist, on top of the kidnapper and cop-killer monikers you’ve already accumulated?” Drew asked.

“My mom always said that anything worth doing is worth doing right.”

Smith’s men stood by the SUV. One of them held a cell phone to his ear. They stared at us.

I figured they were calling Smith to let him know that they had all four of us in one spot.

“Elevator is here,” Nami said. She stuck her hand into the door, keeping it open.

I heaved the bottle at the agents.

It was heavy and strained my shoulder, but I managed to get sufficient strength behind it.

The Molotov arced through the air, seeming to hang there as we watched it.

It smashed on the hood.

Flames swam across the car in an audible whoomp.

Liquid fire splashed onto the gray suit of one of the agents. He cried out and ran from the car, stripping his jacket off as he ran.

“Stop, drop, and roll, asshole.” I followed Drew inside as the screams of bystanders filled the street.

I’d just committed an act of terrorism against agents of the United States government. To say I was fucked would have been to state the obvious. Fort Leavenworth, here I come.

Stabs of pain came with each step as I shuffled into the elevator with Drew and Nami. My teeth were grinding as I leaned against the railing. My last trip in an elevator had consisted of my face getting kicked in.

“You going to make it?” Drew asked. “Your knee is the size of a grapefruit.”

The joint had swelled inside my pants even more. The fabric pulled tight the entire way around it.

“I can cope.”

*I’m so going to jail.*

“Getting locked up is probably a best-case scenario for us right now, Nadia.”

“Stop raping my brain, Ashley.”

“I can’t help it.”

*Ass face.*

We went to the fifth floor. Drew took the lead and brought us to Sammy’s door a moment later.

I knocked in a rhythm.

A shadow appeared under the door. The peephole darkened.

“Ash?”

I waved. “Sup.”

## 19 - Remodeling

Locks clicked. The door swung open.

Sammy wore a white t-shirt that was so tight I could see every contour of her body. A skirt covered half of her legs, leaving the rest exposed in a way that I very much appreciated.

Concern filled her thoughts. And, to my dismay, a little fear.

Nami thought, *Those are some humongous titties.*

I smiled down at her.

She glowered up at me. Flipped me off. *Get out of my head, Gigantor.*

“What are you doing here?” Sammy asked. She gestured to Nami. “Did you kidnap a little girl?”

“I swear to God, I’m going to shoot the next person who calls me a child.”

Drew stepped forward. “Samantha, you need to come with us.” He trained his eyes on hers, but I could feel his internal struggle as he tried not to stare at her chest.

Hell, we all were. Even Nami, who wasn’t gay, had trouble focusing on Sammy’s face.

“Ash said the same thing, but there is no way that I’m going to leave with—”

“I’m sorry, but it’s for your own safety.” Drew pushed his way inside her apartment.

Nami walked past us and disappeared around the door. “Do you have any food in here?”

“Just let yourselves in, why don’t you?” Samantha called after them.

“Sammy, listen to me.” I stood in front of her. “There are men outside right now who are coming up here to kill you. They just tried to do the same to us.”

“But why would someone want to kill me?” Sammy asked. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“They’re bad men. I don’t want to say anything else, because I’m afraid it will put you in even more danger.”

“More danger than someone wanting to kill me?”

That was a good point. But still, I didn't want to spill any information that could get her into trouble down the road. If we managed to survive this thing, then she needed to be able to deny any knowledge of the circumstances surrounding me.

"And why are you dressed like that?" Sammy asked.

*What's that burning smell?*

*The traffic is really loud today.*

*Frosted Flakes are the best.*

The barrage of voices in my head almost made me fall to a knee. I swayed on my feet, but managed to stay upright. There were too many people around for me to fight them off in my weakened condition.

I leaned against the doorjamb, taking some of the pressure off my knee.

"Asher?" Sammy gave me a concerned look, but didn't move any closer.

Drew came back with a small paring knife.

"Did you go through my kitchen?" Sammy asked.

"Yeah, sorry."

"You guys need to leave, *now*." Sammy put her hands on her hips.

Drew pulled my sleeve up and put the blade against the small bump in my shoulder. "Ready?"

I nodded and clenched my teeth. Waited for the pain.

Sammy's eyes went wide. "Wait, what are you doing?"

Drew slid the tip of the knife into my shoulder and pulled it down half an inch. Blood welled around the blade and ran down my arm. The pain wasn't as bad as I expected. It wasn't even as intense as the throbbing in my knee.

"Stop!" Sammy stepped toward Drew, but I put my hand up and stopped her.

"Let him finish."

"Finish what? This is insane!"

Drew pulled the knife out and squeezed both sides of the cut with his thumb and forefinger. More blood spilled from the wound, dribbling to the carpet.

The tracking chip slid out, sticking in a crimson blob on his thumb. He released my shoulder and stared at the tiny tracking device.

Sammy stared it. "What is that?"

"They've been using it follow us," I said. "Remember that shot they gave me in the street? This must have been in it."

*I need to call the cops.*

I almost responded to her thought when I caught myself. Outing my telepathy probably wouldn't be the best of ideas just then.

Drew went back into the apartment. Sammy stood in the door, thunderstruck at what she'd just seen and heard. I bled on the floor.



The elevator hummed down the hall.

“Shit.” I stepped inside and pulled the door from Sammy’s grip. It had three locks on it and I worked all of them.

Her apartment was clean and orderly—the exact opposite of mine. The kitchen consisted of dark cabinets, light wood floors, and stainless appliances.

“You can’t just barge into my place like this.”

None of us responded.

I shoved a chair under the doorknob. Whether or not that could actually keep someone from coming in, I didn’t know, but I’d seen it in a lot of movies. That and it made me feel like I was actually doing something.

“They’re coming up the elevator,” I said.

Nami stood in front of the refrigerator, the door hanging open. She took a bite out of an apple.

She paused, mid-chew, when she saw all of us staring at her. “What?” she asked around a mouthful of fruit. “I eat when I’m nervous.

“I’ll take that.” Drew grabbed the apple from her hand and pressed the bloody tracking chip into the meat of it. He ran to an open window by the kitchen table and tossed it outside.

“I was eating that, you asshole.”

Sammy stomped her foot on the floor. “Everyone, stop it! Get out of my apartment! *Now!*”

We stopped and stared at her.

Then the gunshots started.

Holes punched in the front door.

Blasts shook the floor.

I grabbed Sammy’s arm and yanked her into the kitchen. We fell to the floor and I rolled on top of her, putting my body between her and the shooters.

Nami fell backward into the refrigerator. The shelves knocked over, covering her in food, soda, and milk.

Drew returned fire. He flipped the table over and crouched behind it, shooting over the top.

Drywall exploded as bullets cut through the kitchen in a jagged line across the wall. They worked their way over until they destroyed the cherry cabinets and tile backsplash.

Macaroni showered my back.

Shards of plates and glass broke on the wood around us.

Sammy screamed. I put my hand over her mouth, muzzling her so they wouldn’t hear. So far, they didn’t know where we were in the apartment and they were shooting blind.

Only Drew gave away his position by firing back. He emptied his magazine and fished another from his belt.

Nami extracted herself from the inside of the fridge. Hummus fell from her hair in clumps. The Desert Eagle sat on the floor by her feet.

I held a finger to my lips for Sammy and Nami to see. They both nodded.

Tears formed in the corners of Sammy's eyes. Panic was overtaking her.

My mind wandered out, feeling around the edges of those in the hallway. They were spaces of nothingness, just as the Man in Black had been.

The shooting ceased for several seconds.

We waited in silence. Smoke wafted in the air.

I leaned close to Sammy and whispered in her ear. "I'll protect you, I promise. Lead us to your bedroom as quietly, but quickly, as possible."

Glass tinkled as we stood. The shooting resumed.

I grabbed Nami's wrist and pulled her close. Said, "Follow me."

After pointing at the three of us, I motioned to the other side of the apartment. Drew nodded.

When he put two rounds into the door, I got to my feet and pulled Sammy with me.

Debris crunched under foot as we crossed the kitchen, hunched over at the waist.

Nami grabbed the Desert Eagle and followed.

Drew fired twice more before we reached the bedroom.

A queen-size bed with a large headboard above it sat in the middle of the room. Matching dressers and chests stood in front of the walls. A door was in the back right corner.

"Get in the bathroom and close the door," I said. "Nami, shoot anyone who tries to come through."

"I've never shot a gun in my life."

"See that on the side? Push it down."

She did.

"Now point and shoot." I went to the window and opened it, poking my head out. Wind ruffled my hair.

A ledge, several inches wide, jutted from the wall four feet below the window.

"What are you going to do?" Sammy asked.

"Something really, really stupid. Get in the bathroom."

*Call the cops!*

*Those stupid kids are playing their loud video games again.*

I shook my head, knowing that it wouldn't help, to blot out the voices of Sammy's neighbors. Only a lot of rest and booze would accomplish that.

The SUV burned in the street below. People stood on the sidewalks, watching as flames consumed the vehicle. Smoke rose between the buildings. I could smell the burning leather.

Nami closed the door to the bathroom as I sat on the windowsill. I put my good leg through first, not wanting to trust my ravaged knee by itself on the ledge. The gun went into my waistband again.

How many times had I done that today? It was an unnatural movement that struck me every single time.

The wind inflated my shirt as I stepped outside.

I looked at the pavement below. "Ash, what are you thinking?"

Drew shouted something from the front of the apartment. I couldn't make it out, but it got me moving. He couldn't have many bullets left. If the government flunkies got inside, we were finished.

I turned around so I faced the building. My fingers slipped across the rough brick as I inched my way along the ledge. My heels were in the air, suspended over the drop to the sidewalk.

A window to the neighboring apartment was ten yards further.

It looked closer to a mile.

A strong gust threatened to blow me away from the building. I leaned as far forward as I could, pressing myself against the brick. The khaki pants flapped against my hamstrings.

Vertigo washed over me as I waited for the gust to die.

I picked up my pace when the wind eased. Another one of those could have ruined my day.

Though it took less than a minute to reach the next window, time seemed to have slowed to a crawl. My body felt like it had aged a decade.

The window was locked.

I broke the glass out with the butt of the pistol and cleared the shards away.

*Oh please, oh please, oh please.*

I climbed into another bedroom. Heavy metal posters covered the walls. Avenged Sevenfold played on a laptop in the far corner.

A young mother and her fifteen-year-old son hid behind a couch in the living room. I held my hands up so they could see that I wasn't there to harm them.

They clutched at each other when they saw my gun.

"Please don't hurt us!" The mother squeezed her son close.

A barrage of gunshots came from next door. A heavy crash followed.

They were trying to break the door down.

“I’m here to help,” I said. “Just stay quiet and keep hidden. This will all be over soon.”

“Are you a policeman?”

“No, but my friend is.”

The teen brushed his long, black hair from his eyes. “Why are you dressed like that?”

I moved to the front door. “That’s a long story. Don’t go into the hall no matter what.”

Nothing was visible through the peephole.

The locks were mercifully quiet as I undid them.

Small squeaks came from the hinges, but the agents were too preoccupied with shooting holes in Sammy’s door to hear them.

Wood splintered. They’d broken through.

I spun into the hall, dropping to my busted knee with a grimace. Only two of the men were still in view—the other had gone inside Sammy’s apartment.

I sighted the nearest man and squeezed off a shot.

The bullet punctured the ribs under his right arm and spun him around.

Aimed at the next shooter.

Held my breath.

Put a round through his heart.

Both of them collapsed to the carpet, writhing in pain. The guns slipped from their hands as they grabbed at their wounds.

The last agent stuck his arm into the hallway and fired blind. The wall to my left burst, puffing dust on my shoulder and face.

I slipped to the right and aimed at the hand as it continued jerking the trigger.

Drew tackled him into the hallway. They tripped over the fallen bodies of the other men and went sprawling. They rolled around, jockeying for control of the pistol.

The agent held onto it and managed to get on top. He grabbed the gun with both hands and forced the end of the barrel toward Drew’s face.

I shot him twice in the back. He slumped onto Drew.

A few shallow breaths lifted his back before he was still.

My adrenaline was redlining as I moved down the hall toward the bodies. I kept the gun out front in case one of them made a play.

Drew pushed the body off him and stood. His suit even had blood on it. We both looked like we’d spent the afternoon in a butcher’s shop.

“Gun empty?” I asked.

“No, I decided to get in a fistfight with an armed man for the hell of it.”

*Shit, I thought. Walked right into that one.*

Two of the agents were dead. The one with the wound under his arm was crawling toward his pistol. He was one of the men who had picked me up along with the Man in Black.

Drew stepped on his hand. "Tsk, tsk."

*Where the hell are the cops?*

*Is that fire going to spread to our building?*

I needed to get out of the city again. The thunder in my head was starting to resemble a rock concert.

"Get Nami and Sammy," I said to Drew.

He disappeared through the door.

I grabbed the collar of the agent's suit and dragged him into the apartment.

"Let go of me, you freak!" He punched my swollen knee.

The pain was immediate and intense. The leg buckled, and I fell onto my hip. Fortunately, I'd fallen in a spot without any broken glass or plates. The agony in my knee radiated up my leg as I spun around and stuck the pistol in the man's eye.

He winced around it and stopped fighting.

"That wasn't very nice."

"Fuck you." He spat in my face.

Anger boiled inside of me.

I'd barely had a moment's rest since they'd grabbed me that morning. My body neared a full-on breakdown. My head pounded with a thousand thoughts that weren't mine. Everyone who'd met me in the last two days was on a hit list.

All day, I'd tried to do the right thing.

And that piece of shit had the gall to spit in my face.

Tried to kill my best friend.

I wanted to know why.

I punched him in the ribs I'd shot.

He howled and doubled over, cradling the wound again.

Drew walked in with Sammy and Nami in tow. Sammy looked around at the ruin of her apartment in disbelief. She picked up the handle of a broken coffee mug and inspected it. Her hair was frazzled and big. Drywall dust covered her face and neck.

A sliver of a thought came from the agent's head as he held on to his side. Pain had broken his concentration, allowing something to slip through.

I tossed my pistol to Drew. "Watch the elevator."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find out what the hell is going on." I looked back at Sammy. "I don't know what's going to happen here. You probably don't want to see this."

She stared at me.

I shrugged. "Suit yourself. Can you at least get me some bandages and super glue?"

"Super glue?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Sirens came from the street below. It was a sound that I'd become accustomed to lately. We didn't have much time.

"Just get me some. We have to get out of here before we're arrested."

Sammy opened her mouth to say something else when Nami slapped her in the arm.

"Didn't you just go through the same thing that I did? Those assholes came here to kill us. If you don't think that Ashley and Mr. Clean are on our side after that, then I don't know what to tell you."

"Thanks, Nadine."

She flipped me off again. I wondered if her finger was permanently stuck in that position.

"I still don't like you, but you're my best shot at making it through the day." She looked up at Sammy. "Now Cthulhu knows why, but the man wants super glue so help me find some."

Sammy thought about it for a moment before turning around with a theatrical sigh. "What's a Cthulhu?"

"You've never read Lovecraft?" Nami followed her out of the kitchen.

"What's a Lovingcraft?"

"Never mind." Nami smacked her forehead. "And put on a shirt. I can't think straight with those watermelons hanging off your chest. They're at my eye level, for fuck's sake. I can't imagine what they're doing to Ashley."

They disappeared into the bedroom again.

I turned back to the man on the floor, my anger continuing to heat up. "So you wanted to kill my friends?" I focused on the sliver coming from the agent's mind. Grasped it. Entwined it with my own.

It was like looking through a cracked door.

He laughed at me. "Trying to read my mind? Good luck. I've been around freaks like you for years."

I punched him in the ribs again. The crack in the dam widened. I pried at the gap, working at it like an octopus trying to get in a jar.

We stared at each other as we sat motionless.

Sweat beaded on our foreheads. My skin grew hot. The hair on my neck stood on end.

His eyes narrowed.

I pushed harder.

*...piece... of... shit... freak...*

Blood trickled from his nose. His eyes rolled in their sockets, exposing the whites.

My brain felt too big for my skull, like it was pulsating against the bone.

The other echoes quieted until I heard only fragments of his.

And then the dam burst, and my consciousness flooded into his.

He fell to his back, eyes lolling wildly. His thoughts twisted in manic confusion. My grasp on his mind was loose. I couldn't focus on his memories or emotions as I usually did.

It was like swimming through mud.

Images of Murdock and President Thomas flashed in my mind's eye, but I couldn't make sense of them. Disjointed. Incomprehensible.

Something about the Washington Monument.

Flashbulbs exploded through our linked minds.

Visions of dogs and babies and Christmas trees blinked by in an uncontrollable stream.

Light, blinding and encompassing, swallowed my telepathic hold on him. The pain in my head increased even further.

The agent's body began convulsing. His hands twisted into claws, his back arching.

Blood ran from the corners of his mouth.

I released him and fell back, sucking in a deep, harsh breath. I hadn't realized that I'd stopped breathing.

The agent fell slack.

He was dead.

## 20 - Nami Borrows a Ride

I slammed my fist against the floor. Shards of ceramic and tile punctured tiny holes in my flesh. I barely noticed.

He'd put up an incredible fight. I'd broken through his defenses only to see a dying man's final thoughts, to feel his life drain away.

I watched as his greatest memories flashed by.

And at what cost? What had I gleaned from it? Nothing of consequence.

"Let's go!" Drew yelled from down the hall. "This place will be swarming soon."

Sammy and Nami appeared a moment later with the items I'd asked for. They looked at the man on the floor.

"Did you just mindfuck that guy?" Nami asked.

"Yeah." I grabbed the kitchen counter and pulled myself up. "We need to leave."

"Wait a second." Sammy shook her head. "*What* did you do to him?"

Nami looked up at her. "You don't know about the whole telepathy thing?"

"The *what*?"

I staggered into the hall, pressing the heels of my hands against my ears. So many voices. So much static.

My shoulder slammed against the far wall. Blood ran anew from the incision. I used the wall to stay on my feet as I slid my way toward Drew.

"Jesus, Ash. What happened?" Drew ran over and grabbed my good arm. He looped it over his head and helped me limp to the elevator.

"Today happened. I broke into that guy's head. All of those men have built up mental defenses that I haven't been able to see past. His injuries weakened him and I was able to get in, but he was dying and what I saw didn't make any sense."

Nami dragged Sammy into the hall. "Stop fighting me, goddamn it. We need to leave."

"But my place is destroyed..."

"Your ass is going to be destroyed if we don't get out of here."



“There’s a dead man on my kitchen floor.”

“Want to join him?”

As we stepped into the elevator, I said, “You have to get me out of the city. My head feels like it’s going to burst.”

Drew punched the button for the lobby. “I’m on it.”

The elevator lurched under our feet as it descended. I kept bleeding.

Hard to think.

“Almost everything Smith told me is a lie.” I hoped to get my hands around that scar-faced bastard’s throat.

“No shit. He’s trying to kill us.”

The doors opened, and we stepped out. Shouting came from the street.

Drew looked at Sammy. “Is there a back door to this place?”

“If I tell you, will you let me go?”

“No.”

“But the police—”

I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting against the tsunami of voices drowning my own. “We don’t need to get any more cops killed. I’ve already been arrested once today and that didn’t work out so well.”

One thought stood out in my head then—Sammy’s.

*I wish I’d never walked into that bank.*

Though I couldn’t blame her, that stabbed me in a bad place. By stopping that robbery, I’d ruined a lot of people’s lives. Murdock would still be slaughtering people, but Drew and Sammy would be safe.

“Fine.” Her shoulders sagged, and she pointed down the halls behind her. “This way.”

We shuffled down two hallways before finding a door in the rear of the building. The leg with the banged-up knee wasn’t responding much anymore. It dragged along behind me.

Drew grunted with each step as he carried his weight and mine.

The temperature outside had dropped a little, but the humidity remained high.

Traffic filled the street behind the building, moving just above a slow crawl. People stared out of their windows at us as we stood on the sidewalk.

We were a motley crew of blood and grime and boobs.

*Those dudes are messed up!*

*Why is he dressed like a stripper?*

*Look at the fun bags on her!*

*Are they shooting a movie? That blood almost looks real.*

*Fucking Baltimore traffic sucks.*

The barrage had me swaying on my feet.

"I need to get us a car," Drew said. "Just stay here while I—"

"I got this." Nami still had the Desert Eagle. She held it behind her back. "Why not add a little grand theft auto to my resume while we're at it? I'm so going to be in jail or dead by the end of the day. My mom is going to be so pissed."

Her face fell as she turned away from us. "Watch this shit."

She shuffled toward a white Ford Expedition. The top of her head didn't reach the bottom of the driver's side window as she stood by the door.

A man wearing wire-rimmed glasses and an Orioles baseball cap sat behind the wheel. His fingers drummed on the dash as a song we couldn't hear played.

Nami knocked on the door.

The man started and looked around, spotting us. His head recoiled as he took in our appearance. I couldn't blame him.

Nami waved her hand above her head to get his attention. He peered down at her, his bewilderment growing.

He put the window down.

"Excuse me, mister." Nami's voice was so low that I could barely make out what she said. She sounded desperate and whiny, like a petulant child. "I can't find my parents."

"Are you lost, sweetheart?" the man asked.

Nami nodded. "My daddy said to wait here, but he didn't come back."

The man's eyes darted back to us for a moment. "Do you know who those people are?"

"No, but they're really scaring me."

"They're scaring me too. Do you know your daddy's phone number? We can call him." He turned his head and looked toward the passenger seat.

Nami pulled the gun from behind her back and pointed it at the open window. "Out of the car, butt plug." The desperation evaporated from her tone.

"What did you say—?" He turned back to Nami. The color drained out of his cheeks when he saw the gun. "I don't understand. What's going on?"

"I'm stealing your car, the fuck does it look like? I'm a government employee, and I'm confiscating your shit. Get out."

He stared at the pistol. "That's not even real."

She answered by pulling the slide back, ejecting the chambered round. The movement was laborious and appeared as if it took all of her strength.

It got her point across.

His eyes followed the ejected brass as it bounced on the sidewalk. He fumbled with the door handle and climbed out, focusing his attention back on the

pistol.

Nami kept it trained on him. "Walk away."

With his hands raised, he stepped backward down the sidewalk. "I hate coming into the city."

My shoulders sagged as I watched the man turn and run. My legs finally gave out. I slumped down; the only thing that kept me from crashing to the pavement was my arm around Drew's shoulders.

"Ash?" Sammy grabbed my forearm.

"Open the back door," Drew grunted as he dragged me to the Expedition.

"I can't believe we're stealing a car." Sammy ran over and opened the rear door, climbing inside. She helped Drew slide me onto the backseat. I stared up at the ceiling, waiting for my eyes to refocus. It took a while.

Drew and Nami got into the front.

I mumbled, "Can't think straight."

Drew said something in reply, but I couldn't make it out over the chorus of voices all around me. It felt as if the entire city was sitting in the seat beside me.

Sammy put my head in her lap and looked down into my eyes. Her breasts pushed against the top of my head. At least one good thing had come out of the day.

Her mouth worked. I didn't hear her.

The Expedition jostled as Drew rammed the front end against something. I assumed he was pushing other vehicles out of the way. He and Nami shouted at one another in the front.

*—fire—*

*—but the pitching is—*

*—why is she always saying—*

The flurry of conversations I picked up on had me lightheaded. They dulled my aches and pains, replacing them with despair and fatigue.

I drifted.

Sammy patted me on the cheeks. Shouted something at Drew.

I fell away.

## 21 - Neck Deep

A twinge in my shoulder pulled me back.

Drew was twisted around, his knees on the front seat. His fingers manipulated something against my shoulder. My skin pinched, and I tried to pull away from it.

“Stay still, damn it.” Drew pinched harder.

“What are you doing?”

“Super gluing the cut. I’m trying to hold it closed until the bond forms, but you’re squirming around like a virgin on prom night.”

“I love when you sweet talk me.”

Sammy still had my head in her lap. “So this is why you wanted the glue? I didn’t know you could do that for a cut.”

“Stitches are better, but we can’t get him to a hospital right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’d be killed.”

“In a hospital?”

“Yeah,” Drew said. “They almost got us in a police station.”

He released my arm and inspected the cut. “Looks like it’s holding.”

I sat up with a groan. My body had stiffened from the short nap. Trees stood outside the windows. A metal-roofed pavilion sat a few hundred yards into a clearing. “Where are we?”

“About two miles outside of D.C.” Drew sat back.

“You let me sleep for that long? Christ, we have to get moving.”

“Just hang on a minute. I get that you’re trying to play the hero card, but your body is running in the red. If I’m going to help you with whatever it is you feel we need to do, then I have to know what you saw in that agent’s head.”

I cut a glance at Sammy. “We shouldn’t say anything in front of her. She needs deniability, or she’s going to end up like us.”

“Too late,” Sammy said. “He already told me that those men wanted me dead because I was with you this morning. And Nami keeps saying that you can read minds. I mean, I believe in psychics and all of that, but if you could really hear

someone's thoughts, then why do you live in that dumpy apartment? Why not read some investment banker's head and then buy some stocks?"

"It doesn't work like that. Well, it could, but that isn't exactly moral. Besides, I spend most of my time trying *not* to hear what everyone is saying. Do you ever see someone and think about how stupid they look in their clothes or how fat their ass is? I hear that. Ever think about how horny you are? I hear that too."

Sammy blushed. "Really? Do you know what I'm thinking right now?"

"I'm trying not to."

"Why?"

"Because I like you and if I get a peek at what's inside your head, then I'll end up feeling the same way about you that I do everyone else."

"Oh."

The key word there was *trying*. I did my best to blot out their thoughts, but it wasn't working so well. They were the only people within my telepathic range, so the problem was at least somewhat manageable.

Still, things were slipping through the cracks.

Sammy didn't believe that I could read minds. Good. I didn't bother trying to convince her. The idea of escape kept coming to her, but she wasn't sure how she could get away from us. She understood that we'd saved her life. She also realized that I was the reason people were trying to kill her in the first place.

I would have let her run if I thought that she would be safer that way.

Nami stood outside the vehicle, talking into a cell phone. I watched her through the windshield as she waved her arms in an animated fashion. Her pigtails flopped around as she shook her head no.

I could hear the argument she was having with her mother in my head.

"She's trying to convince her mom that she isn't a criminal," I said.

Drew bobbed his head up and down. "Her name popped up on the news about ten minutes ago for stealing this ride. She's also wanted for questioning in the shooting at Samantha's. Oh, and for kidnapping her. She's trying to explain to her mother that she's been framed, but it doesn't appear to be going well."

"Whose phone is that?" I asked.

"She borrowed it from a couple having lunch in that pavilion up there."

"By borrowing it, you mean she stuck a gun in their face and took it."

"Yup. She's sassy. I like it."

Underneath Drew's hardened, sarcastic exterior, he feared that his life was effectively over. His career as a detective would never recover. Jail time was likely. Melissa's life might be in jeopardy too.

He'd always understood that his affiliation with me could get him in trouble with the government, but he'd never expected such madness to pop up out of nowhere. The repercussions of me walking into that bank were beyond what either of us could have imagined.

Despite the turmoil and near-death experiences I'd shoved Drew into, he never considered abandoning me. He would ride this out by my side until the end.

A truer friend, I couldn't ask for.

"I'm sorry about all of this, Drew."

*Get out of my head, Ashley.*

"I'm trying."

*Try harder, or I'll start thinking about things I do in my private time.*

"Oh God, please don't."

Sammy inched away from me. "Why are you talking to yourself?"

"He was talking to me." Drew smiled. "We're coming to an understanding."

Sammy's fear of me grew. She found me interesting and dangerous, but she assumed that I was a loon.

Maybe I was.

"There are checkpoints all over Baltimore. We barely got out. Every cop and fed on the east coast is looking for us," Drew said. "That's not to mention Murdock. We're neck deep, Ashley."

"Who is Murdock?" Sammy asked.

"A nightmare." I waved for Nami to come inside. "A nightmare that won't stop coming after me until I'm dead."

*I'm getting really tired of these riddles,* Sammy thought.

"I'm being cryptic for your own good." The words came out before I realized that Sammy hadn't actually spoken.

Her mouth dropped open. *No way.*

I held her gaze, but didn't say anything.

Nami yelled one more time before slamming the phone shut and throwing it into a thicket of bushes behind the Expedition. She climbed back into her seat.

"How was your beauty sleep?" She leaned closer to me. "Oh wait, you're still ugly. Never mind."

"I'm not going to take shit from someone who had to call her mom, Nebraska."

"Did you just call me a state? Wow. All the beatings you've taken have lowered your IQ even further."

Drew held a hand up. "There's a nationwide manhunt going on for us right now. How about we trash talk each other later?"

“He started it,” Nami mumbled.

“Tell us what you saw with that agent back there,” Drew said.

Sammy shifted in her seat and crossed her arms under her breasts. She expected me to start spewing a bunch of bullshit that she wouldn’t believe.

That she didn’t *want* to believe.

“I couldn’t make sense of it. I was trying to poke around in there while he was dying.”

“You were reading his mind while he died?” Nami asked. “What was it like? Did he see a white light or something?”

“Actually, he did. Images of his childhood flashed to him too.”

“Whoa. That’s like the stuff they show in movies.”

“Things were moving so fast in there that I couldn’t do my normal thing. It’s hard to explain what it’s like for me when I’m searching someone’s mind, but I would describe it kind of like digging through a filing cabinet at warp speed. Some of the folders are thicker than others, and they’re in a neon binding. That’s usually the stuff that’s important to someone. I’ll go through those first, before moving onto other memories.”

Sammy blinked several times, incredulous. “You’re telling me that reading someone’s mind is like looking through a neon filing cabinet?”

*What a crock.*

I ignored the thought. “With that guy though, I couldn’t really access anything. His defenses were incredible. Smith has somehow trained his men to block out telepathic access.”

“Then how did you get in?” Drew asked.

The sun was setting through the windshield behind him, illuminating the five o’clock shadow on his head.

“The gunshot had weakened him a lot, and I managed to worm my way inside. It took a crazy amount of effort though. Our struggle put him into convulsions.” I inspected my hands for a moment, and saw a small tremor running through my fingers. My body was done. “I did see a few things though. Something is going on with Murdock, the president, and the Washington Monument.”

Drew rubbed his stubble-covered head. “The Washington Monument?” He spun around in his seat and pushed the dial on the radio.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Hang on a second.” He rolled through the stations.

Sammy continued staring at me. *What random thought can I use to prove that he isn’t reading my mind? What about my first grade teacher, or—*

“Don’t go down this road unless you’re ready to accept certain things.”

*My first crush was Billy Dee Williams.*

"Billy Dee Williams? Really?"

*I hate my job.*

"Who doesn't hate their job?"

Her hands dropped to her lap. Her internal struggle with acceptance was at its tipping point. I gave it the final push it needed, even though I knew that it would make her look at me as some kind of monster.

Then again, killing someone in her kitchen had probably already done that.

"Your mother died when you were thirteen, you moved to Baltimore three weeks after you graduated college, and you haven't had sex in six months. That's a crime, if you ask me."

Sammy made a funny sound that came out like a mixture of a cough and a gag.

Then she punched me in the nose.

Nami laughed so hard in the front seat that I thought she might piss herself. She doubled over, hand on her stomach, and rested her head against the seat as she cracked up.

I grabbed my nose and squeezed it as tears formed in the corners of my eyes. One thing I'd learned about myself in all of my boxing classes was that I didn't take a punch to the nose very well. The damn things always made my eyes water.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered. Sammy had a pretty good punch on her.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry." Sammy reached out and touched my arm. "I didn't mean to do that. It just sort of... happened. What you said freaked me out." Her face reddened. "And it was embarrassing."

"It was my bad. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't expect to take a shot to the nose, but still."

Nami saw my tears and laughed even harder, pointing at my face. "You're crying because you got punched by a girl? Too awesome!"

Drew looked at me in the rearview mirror and shook his head.

"To hell with all of you." A laugh slipped out of me, despite the pain radiating through my entire body.

Even Sammy smiled as she looked around at all of us. We were such an unlikely, dysfunctional group that it was hard not to find us amusing in some way.

Drew found a news station and stopped fiddling with the radio. He leaned toward the dash, turning an ear in the direction of one of the speakers.

"How is this possible?" Sammy asked after a few seconds. Her hands fidgeted in her lap as she watched me.



*Don't think of anything embarrassing, don't think of anything embarrassing, don't think of anything embarrassing.*

"I took a knock to the head during my last tour, and my life's been fucked up ever since. Remember the beer I was swilling in the bank?" I tapped my temple with my index finger. "It helps to block out other people's thoughts."

Sammy's face softened. "That's why you live so poorly. You have trouble functioning."

I nodded.

She reached out and touched my hand as she had at the coffee shop that morning. It felt like that had been a decade ago. The same electric shock ran through my body from her caress. Her soft fingers were like magic on my cut and swollen hand.

It had been six months since she'd been with someone, but I was already in a years' long draught.

Her trepidation remained, but it lessened as she looked into my battered eyes.

"You guys aren't going to make out now, are you?" Nami asked. "That would be disgusting."

"You're a nasty little bugger." Sammy retracted her hand.

"Quiet," Drew said. He turned the radio up louder.

*"—twenty minutes, President Thomas will take the stage in front of the Washington Monument to discuss today's horrific events. Typically, he gives these kinds of speeches from the Oval Office, but his aides have informed us that he wants to—"*

Drew turned the volume down. "So one of Smith's men knew something was going to happen with Murdock and the president at the Washington Monument."

"And the president is going to give a speech there in twenty minutes," I said.

We sat in silence for a few moments.

"So what in the shit does that mean?" Nami asked. "I'm confused as hell. If Smith knows Murdock is going after the president next, why wouldn't he warn the Secret Service? There's no way they would allow him to go out in public if they knew he would be in danger."

If only I could have seen more of what that agent knew. I felt like we were blindly diving headfirst into a pool, and we didn't know how deep the water was.

"What if Smith *wants* Murdock to take President Thomas out?" I asked.

"What?" Nami's head tilted to the side. "Do you have brain damage? You were in the same building I was. He's had agents chasing us all afternoon."

"Yeah, actually, I do have brain damage—that's why we're all here, Nelly. And yes, I was there. They barely had any men, or equipment. Drew just told us that the building was being renovated for a private company."

“But—”

I held a hand up, cutting her off. “They’ve been ridiculously cavalier about killing us too. They don’t seem to care how public the setting, or what questions might be asked about their actions. That typically isn’t something a high-ranking government official orders.”

Drew drummed his fingers on the center console. “You think he’s gone rogue?”

“Maybe. I don’t know for sure. But what if he has?”

“Then I’d say that we know even less than we thought we did. I’d say that we’re a couple of pawns in a chess game, and we aren’t even sure who’s moving us around.”

I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath. It hurt. “It also means that we need to get down to the Washington Monument. I might be the only person who can single out Murdock.”

## 22 - Escape

The war drums were beating.

As the sun set behind the Washington Monument, it cast a long shadow over the raucous crowd waiting for President Thomas. Furious citizens jammed the courtyard surrounding the obelisk. Throngs of people pushed back across Constitution Avenue, spilling hundreds of yards beyond the monument.

They wanted answers.

They wanted blood.

Murdock smiled at the fury he'd created. And he was only getting started.

The crowd's fervor approached riot levels as they waited for answers from the POTUS. Before they even knew the questions, the people wanted to answer with war. It was a wholly predictable response to Murdock.

He'd made an entire career of inciting violence, fear, and retribution.

When people were afraid, they became irrational. They demanded action.

Wait until they saw what came next.

What insanity would follow President Thomas being killed by his own Secret Service? The downfall of an empire? World War? Murdock couldn't wait to find out.

With one final blow, he would bring down the system that had left him to rot. He would smite the man who had ordered his abandonment.

Then he would find Smith, and the real fun would begin. That man's death would be legendary. Murdock always believed in saving the best for last.

Standing in the thick of the crowd, Murdock didn't need to read anyone's thoughts to see their murderous intent. They shouted at one another. Fights almost broke out. Security guards arrested dozens of people.

Their combined fury didn't match the vengeful fire that burned inside him.

A brown, hooded sweatshirt, loose jeans, and a Nationals baseball cap made him appear like everyone else in the crowd. Slipping through the police checkpoints had been as simple as expected. He didn't carry a firearm, never had, and could have mentally forced one of the guards to ignore it even if he did.

Why carry a gun when your mind was the most powerful weapon in your arsenal?

The ease with which he could destroy the leaders of the world's most powerful nation amused him.

Fatigue settled behind his eyes.

He'd pushed his abilities to their limits at the police station. Normally, he would have rested for a day or two before going out on another mission, but he couldn't afford any down time. Not when he was this close.

Murdock slowed his breathing, allowed his muscles to relax.

His mind wandered out.

Tents and electrical gear snaked around the back of the Monument. Inside, Murdock felt the presence of dozens of Secret Service agents and presidential staffers. They hustled about, rushing to have everything prepared for the start of the speech.

He head hopped from one to the next, gathering bits of intel about the upcoming proceedings. The autopsy on the body Murdock had used to fake his own demise wasn't completed yet, but they were all certain that the 'terrorist' had died.

None suspected that he was standing outside, waiting, listening.

Most thought the idea of giving a speech in the open after the day's events was beyond stupid. They hated leaving the president vulnerable, even if the threat had been nullified.

Thomas sat in a chair at the base of the monument.

A woman slathered makeup around his eyes, attempting to smooth out his crow's feet. A hairdresser combed, snipped, and sprayed.

Thomas rehearsed his lines. He was anxious, his stomach knotted. For a man who didn't get nervous, this was a rare and uncomfortable feeling.

He feared what Smith would attempt next. He raged at himself for not exterminating that snake before he bit.

Murdock maneuvered through their heads with caution. As much as he wanted to force the most powerful man in the free world to strangle himself in front of his staff, that wouldn't be enough.

Everyone had to see.

The cameras had to be rolling.

Soon.

He released his mental grip and relaxed, allowing himself a few moments of peace.

Memories of his captivity flooded in as they always did when he tried to relax.

Only weeks ago, Murdock sat in an iron chair, waiting for Adeeb Azizi to arrive.

The metal was cool. Charred chunks of flesh remained along the edges.

Whether those were his or another man's, Murdock couldn't be certain. He hadn't seen anyone other than his captors in a long while. His back still ached from their last session, but the skin had scabbed over and begun to scar.

They'd stripped him naked and strapped him to the chair.

Forced him to watch as they heated it with glowing coals.

How long he sat there, he couldn't remember. When he passed out, they would wake him with smelling salts or buckets of water.

They had to peel him from the chair when it was over. He couldn't walk for weeks after that. Couldn't sleep or eat.

He was clothed this time, so he expected some new, fresh horror to be inflicted upon him. Adeeb's sadistic streak had an element of creativity to it. He preferred to mix physical pain with psychological.

Forcing Murdock to mutilate himself had only been the start.

Being in the chair didn't fill him with dread as it usually did.

He was anxious, yes. Nervous.

But not scared.

For the past week, he'd felt a familiar sensation in his mind. An expansion. An ability to wander.

Whispers had come to him in his cell, stray thoughts floating through the caves. He felt emotions that weren't his.

They still drugged him every few hours, but the effect wasn't as damning as it had been. Was his body growing a tolerance to it? Were they giving him a different kind of drug?

Either way, Murdock saw his opportunity.

He hoarded the crusts of the moldy bread they gave him every night, eating only half of his already-meager rations. By the end of the week, he had nearly three full slices of grain hidden behind his water dish.

Murdock ate them all that morning, hoping they would provide enough fuel for his dilapidated body. He felt alive and aware. Angry and nervous.

Hateful.

The gruff, dirty bastards came in an hour later. The first man through the door held a needle in his right hand. He knelt in front of Murdock as he always

did and leaned forward. The other guard remained by the door, watching with indifference.

Murdock summoned all of his willpower and focused on the first man's mind. It had been so long since he'd used his abilities that the sensation felt foreign. He let the man reach forward with the syringe, but he forced him to stop when the needle was less than an inch from Murdock's elbow.

It held steady as the man pushed the plunger with his thumb, ejecting the drug against Murdock's arm in a thin stream. Nausea washed over Murdock as he manipulated the guard's mind, forcing him to think that he'd actually injected his prisoner. His back blocked the other guard's view of the procedure.

He pulled away and stood up. Murdock grabbed his arm and rubbed it as if he'd been given a shot. White liquid dripped from his elbow, but neither of the men noticed.

Murdock released his hold and sank against the wall behind him. The injection from a few hours ago still had his powers sedated, and the effort to fight through it left him exhausted.

Skipping that session had made all the difference.

As he sat in the torture chamber, he felt ready. His mind was finally clear. His rage overpowered his fatigue and weariness.

Azizi's days of torture were coming to an end.

The doors opened a few minutes later. Azizi stepped into the room, his soulless eyes inspecting Murdock.

"You look well, my friend. Have your rations been increased?"

"No."

"Is that so? Then what has raised your spirits?" Azizi leaned against the wall in front of the chair. It was his favorite spot. He liked watching Murdock's eyes during their sessions.

"I have a good feeling about today." Murdock prepared himself for the moment he'd spent too many weeks (or was it months?) thinking about.

"So do I." Half of Azizi's mouth curled up. "I learned something interesting today, Alan."

Murdock was stretching out his mental tendrils when the use of his first name stopped him. He hadn't heard it spoken aloud since he'd left the States. "How do you know that name?"

"We know all about you, Alan Richards, aka Murdock. You Americans are always so surprised when you find out that we have means outside of your purview."

If they knew both his real name and his call sign, then they had access to information that should have been impossible for them to reach. Had they

captured someone else working for the Pysch Ward? Did they have a mole?

Had Smith, that rat-bastard fuck, not only left him to die in that hellhole, but also turned over information on him?

“Don’t look so shocked, my friend. Did you really think that America is the only land with special people?” Azizi tapped his forehead.

The pain and torment had been incompressible since Murdock’s capture, but he’d never been asked a single question. Not one. He’d assumed they were waiting for him to break. Now he understood why they’d never bothered—they had another source.

That meant that they were torturing Murdock for the fun of it. His hands shook as the realization set in.

Murdock wanted to spend a significant amount of time working Azizi over, but he knew that his window of escape was small. If he was going to get out, then he couldn’t waste time. Besides, he would have plenty of time for retribution when he got back to D.C.

He stood from the chair. Though his emaciated body had lost significant weight, his foot still throbbed under the pressure. “Knowing my name won’t do you any good, I’m afraid.”

“What are you doing? You know that you are only to do what I instruct you to.” Azizi’s half-grin slid to a frown. “Your punishment will be most—”

“I think I’ll skip my punishment today, *my friend*.” Murdock melded his mind into Azizi’s.

The torturer went stiff. His eyes widened, forehead wrinkling.

For the first time, Azizi felt fear in Murdock’s presence. With their roles reversed, Murdock walked to the door and stood beside it so that no one outside could see him through the bars that comprised the window.

With ease, he carved into Azizi’s memories, searching for the layout of the compound. In seconds, he knew how many guards and soldiers roamed the caves. He learned the best way to escape into the desert.

Intel on foreign telepaths working throughout Europe and the Middle East flitted through Murdock’s mind. He had little time, or inclination, to worry about them. Escape was the only thing of concern to him. His days of playing the espionage game were over.

He searched the hall for other minds. His powers were still limited from his physical condition, and he could only scan a few yards at a time. A lone guard sat a few feet down the hall, dozing in and out of sleep.

Murdock forced him to stand and walk toward the cell.

“Adeeb, I want us to be friends. Friends help each other. I want you to chew off your own hand.” He gestured to the door. “But time is an issue for me. There

are nearly five hundred men walking around out there, and I have to get past, or kill, all of them. Your particular talents have weakened me, so the task will prove a bit daunting.”

The guard opened the door and stepped into the cell.

Murdock forced him to place his rifle against the wall and then strip.

“So, Adeeb, I’m going to give you an option that you never offered me. You, *my friend*, can choose death. I can tie you to that chair and start the fire underneath it, or I can take your life and save you the horror you so easily set upon me. You might survive the chair. It depends on how long it will take someone to come and check on you. Judging from your knowledge of the schedule around here, it could be hours. That would be a truly awful death.”

A tear ran down Azizi’s face, disappearing into his beard.

*Death.*

The guard dropped his pants to the floor and stepped out of them. He bent down and pulled a knife from a sheath attached to his belt. His hand wavered for a moment as he raised the blade and plunged it into his throat.

Blood sprayed the walls and floor.

The guard dragged the blade across his neck.

Murdock slid the clothing away from the dying man, not wanting red stains on them. A bloody outfit would draw attention to him.

Azizi turned and faced the wall.

He slammed his forehead off the stone. Blood gushed from his split skin, running into his eyes.

He never blinked.

A spasm racked the guard’s body as he fell into the corner. The blade stuck from his throat.

Murdock pulled the pants on. The waist was too large, so he used the belt to hold them up.

Azizi cracked his head off the wall again. His face was a mask of crimson.

The shirt went on next. It was baggy around his shoulders, but that wasn’t uncommon for the guards. Their clothing rarely fit.

Azizi’s skull was visible after the third crack. He did it a fourth time.

Murdock grabbed the rifle and checked the magazine and chamber. The barrel was filthy, but the AK-47 was a dependable weapon. He had little doubt it would fire.

As he stepped through the open door, he heard Azizi’s head pop like a melon.



A staffer walked onto the stage, squinting against the bright lights.

Cameras flashed as people took his picture. Several cheers floated from the crowd. Murdock assumed the idiots thought the staffer was the president.

The young man tapped on the microphone. Thumps came from unseen speakers. He held up a hand with all of his fingers splayed open.

*Five minutes, Murdock thought, until I bring the entire system down. Five minutes, Mr. President.*

## 23 - Pain Works

The tires kicked up rocks and dirt as we fishtailed onto a road.

Drew's shoulders hunched as he drove, his hands wringing the steering wheel. He guided us toward the beltway. Signs indicated it was only a mile or two ahead.

While Drew didn't hesitate to follow me into a world of shit, he understood that things probably weren't going to work out for us. His trepidation added to my guilt.

I needed him to get me to the Washington Monument, but that meant putting his life in danger. No matter what path I chose, the odds were high that someone would get killed.

"I thought you said you were trying to keep me alive?" Sammy asked. "If someone is going to try to assassinate President Thomas, then why in God's name are we actually *going* to where you think it will happen?"

Nami peered over her seat at us. "She has a point. If you guys want to do something dumb like this, then let us the hell out of the car."

They were right. Even with Smith and his minions looking for Sammy and Nami, they would be safer if they stayed as far away from Murdock as possible. He probably didn't know anything about them, or even care, but his madness made him too dangerous and unpredictable.

"Let's drop them off before we get inside the city," I said to Drew. I turned to Sammy. "No matter what you do, don't call anyone you know for a few days, at least. If this really is going down with the president, then things are going to get insane. Keep your head down."

"There's a McDonald's up here. We'll let you out over—" His gaze fixated on a spot through the windshield. "Shit."

"Christ," I said. "Now what?"

"There's a cruiser sitting on the overpass ahead." He looked into the rearview mirror. "And there's one behind us. They're following us. They're probably tracking the OnStar in this damn thing."

“We’re fucked,” Nami said. “I’m going to spend the next thirty years fighting off skanks in the showers.”

I looked through the back windshield. The cruiser maintained our pace, but his lights weren’t on. They probably didn’t want to make a move if they thought we had Sammy held hostage.

If we let them out now, the police would take them into custody. That sounded great, except for what happened to me when I was arrested. I didn’t trust that anyone could keep them safer than I could.

We couldn’t drop them off now.

Traffic slowed ahead of us.

D.C. was a city that I avoided at all costs. If you attempted driving through it any time after one or two in the afternoon, you would spend hours sitting in traffic jams. Only half a million people lived there, but the population doubled during the day. It was insanity.

Drew slowed down and settled into the right lane. He looked at me in the mirror. “It’s make or break time, Ashley. If we pull over to let them out, we’re all going to get arrested. But if we don’t, then they’re in this until the end. You know I’ve got your back either way.”

The cops were moving in on us. Traffic wouldn’t allow us to make it to the National Mall in time to stop Murdock unless we threw caution to the wind.

I looked over at Sammy. She returned my gaze. Even though I’d basically wrecked her life, she still looked at me with kindness and concern.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said.

But I did. Just like the bank the night before and the cemetery that morning, I couldn’t turn my back on the call of duty. I went to the sandbox to make a difference. If I turned my back now, what good would I have accomplished with all of my sacrifices? Would anything I’d done have made a difference?

The radio announced that the president would take the stage in a few minutes.

“Look at you.” Sammy took in my ruined face. “You can barely sit up in the chair, let alone go fight some assassin. Let someone else do it.”

I wanted nothing more than to pull over and let the chips fall where they may.

But I couldn’t do that. I had to keep pushing forward. Keep fighting. What good would my ability be if I didn’t use it to stop something as catastrophic as this? What kind of man would I be if I didn’t stand up to monsters like Murdock?

There was one last thing I had to do today.

“Punch it, Drew.”

“Better buckle up.” Drew yanked the wheel to the right and floored the accelerator.

The Expedition roared as it jerked onto the grass shoulder of the road. Rocks kicked up, dinging off our doors. People shouted at us as we shot by the stalled traffic.

“Jesus Christ, baldy.” Nami jostled around her seat. “Don’t get us killed before we even get there.”

He ignored her. “They’re going to have a platoon chasing us by the time we get to the Mall.”

The cruiser behind us veered onto the shoulder. Lights flashed, and sirens wailed.

Sammy clutched at the handle on her door and hunched over. She prayed that she would live through the rest of the day.

Drew turned onto a road that ran parallel to the beltway. Hundreds of voices crammed their way into my head.

I doubled over, holding my temples again. Sammy said something beside me, but it was drowned by the torrent of echoes fighting for dominance in my mind. I fought against them with what little energy I had.

It was a losing effort.

The city descended on me in a shouting match that threatened to break my mind. My body felt loose and disconnected. My thoughts floated away, replaced by those of the commuters surrounding us.

My vision tunneled, growing darker by the second.

Drew shouted something incomprehensible in front of me. The vehicle shifted on its springs and my shoulder jammed against the door, sending a fresh bolt of pain running into my neck. The agony cleared the fog a bit.

Though it didn’t have the same effect as alcohol, the pain seemed to help.

I took a long, deep breath and then slapped my throbbing knee. The pain was fierce and nauseating, but it worked. My bearings returned, and I could see again. The barrage of voices lessened. I could still hear them, but they sounded closer to a packed restaurant than a rock concert.

*The fuck is that guy doing on the shoulder?*

*This radio station blows.*

*President Thomas is going to speak tonight? That guy can suck a dick.*

Drew careened around a turn so fast that I thought the vehicle was going to flip. At the last possible moment, he straightened the wheel and we rocketed forward onto Route 50. Traffic was just as heavy there, so Drew didn’t bother staying on the road.

He took us onto the sidewalk, plowing through a mailbox on the corner. Envelopes, magazines, and advertisements flew into the air like confetti. They covered the windshield before blowing away.

Paperwork littered the sidewalk behind us.

A couple walked out of a shop on the right, holding hands and laughing. They spotted the grill of the Expedition and dove back through the doorway. They shouted profanities at us as we sped past them.

“Sorry!” Drew slowed as we approached another intersection.

“Are you trying to hit these people?” Nami asked.

“Would you like to drive? Oh wait, your feet wouldn’t even reach the pedals.”

“I’m trying so hard not to poop myself right now!” Sammy’s eyes looked like they might bug out of their sockets. She shook her head back and forth, as if denial would make the situation go away.

I bit my tongue, grimacing against the pain as the cobwebs continued to clear. “Nicole, you probably should have stolen a car with a child seat in it. Then you’d be able to see over the dash.”

She spun around and pointed at my face. “The day I take shit from someone who looks like the Elephant Man, is—”

Screeching metal cut her off.

Drew swerved back onto the road, scraping the side of the SUV along a parked car. Sparks showered against my window.

We blasted through a red light, swerving around vehicles as they meandered through the city.

The voices descended upon me again.

I slapped my swollen, sore face.

Sammy, still clutching her door, stared at me like I had horns sprouting out of my forehead.

The police cruiser behind us closed the distance, coming within a few feet of our bumper.

“This isn’t going to work,” I said. “They’re going to arrest us, shoot us, or both, long before we can get near Murdock or the president.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Drew nodded at a police barricade through the windshield. “That’s for the president’s speech. We’re getting close.” He yanked the wheel again and swung us onto Fourteenth Street.

The tires squealed and belched smoke.

“But how are we going to actually get into the crowd? There’s a goddamn army of fuzz descending upon us.” I squeezed my knee again to fight the cacophony of discord flooding my brain.

Though the voices abated, the pain trick didn't work as well this time. There were too many people around me to keep fighting them off for long.

I swooned in my seat, the belt holding me in place.

"Ashley?" Drew looked at me in the mirror. "You still with us?"

"Barely."

An idea hit me then.

If we got close enough to Murdock, The Bridge would reform between us. When that had happened in the cemetery, the power of his mind had drowned everything else out. The same effect would help make me more functional now.

What I would do to stop him then, I didn't know, but at least I wouldn't be a zombie sitting there and drooling on myself.

Drew slammed on the brakes.

The belt drew taught across my chest, my head snapping forward.

I looked through the windshield.

Half a dozen cop cars blocked the street.

Officers stood behind open doors, pistols pointed at us.

## 24 - Political Gold

As President Thomas strode onto the stage, Murdock leached his thoughts.

The smug bastard reveled in his newfound support. Less than a week ago, his approval rating had been in the toilet. Now he could kick a puppy and people would cheer him.

Tragedies, and the resulting fear and anger that followed them, always drummed up support for government action. Thomas knew it. All politicians knew it.

Murdock would give them all the tragedy they wanted.

*Gold*, Thomas thought. *Political gold*.

The crowd exploded in raucous applause as Thomas walked to the podium. Keeping his glee internal, he put on his sternest face and looked over his congregation. His tailored suit, trim grey hair, and lined face gave him an air of supremacy.

The applause rose to thunderous levels as Thomas stood there and soaked it in.

Murdock struggled with every fiber of his being not to force Thomas to bludgeon himself with his microphone.

The president basked in the ovation for nearly a minute before quieting them with his hands.

He stared straight into the designated camera. “We’ve lost many brothers and sisters today.” He paused, looking out over the feverish crowd as they nodded their agreement. “We’ve lost friends and family, loved ones and neighbors. America has suffered a great evil today.”

A thin man wearing a sweatshirt with a picture of the American flag on it clapped his hands with vigor beside Murdock. His elbows rapped against Murdock’s ribs twice.

The man didn’t apologize.

Murdock considered forcing the man to swallow his own tongue, but he held back.

The time for games was fast approaching, but it hadn’t arrived just yet.

Secret Service agents lined the perimeter of the stage. Their eyes scanned the crowd, analyzing the area for possible threats.

Little did they know that they would be the assassins.

“We lost a great statesman, a true patriot, in Senator McArthur. We lost our brothers in blue. Too many officers, too many protectors, were killed needlessly today.” Thomas’ jaw muscles flared. “These were not suicides—they were murders.”

The crowd quieted.

Murdock knew from their thoughts that most people expected that foul play of some kind had happened. Hearing it spoken aloud in such finality still took them off guard. Their clapping died down, expressions fallen.

“Today, we suffered a terrorist attack unlike anything we’ve ever seen. We’ve been infiltrated by those who want to destroy our way of life, those who would crush America under their boot heels.”

Silence filled the courtyards surrounding the monument.

Thomas held another dramatic pause. “What they fail to understand is the indomitable spirit of the American people. We will not sit idly by as our loved ones are murdered. We will strike back at the heart of those who would harm us.”

The crowd’s vigor returned. Shouts came from the back of the courtyard. They wanted blood.

Murdock would give it to them.

He lowered his forehead and clenched his hands into fists.

Focused his rage. Let it build.

He latched onto the minds of five secret service agents lining the stage.

They were strong and determined, youthful and fit.

They never stood a chance of resisting Murdock.

Pistols were pulled from their holsters. Shined, black shoes clopped up the stairs. Hardened, lined faces quivered as they walked across the stage.

Murmurs came from the crowd. The man beside Murdock stopped clapping.

“What are they doing?” he asked.

“They’re assassinating the most powerful man in the world.” Murdock grinned at the gangly man. “Let’s see if you’ll clap at this.”

Four of the agents stopped walking and turned toward the edges of the stage. They raised their pistols and sighted their fellow agents who still watched the crowd.

The oldest of the detail, Agent Feinstein, strode over to the president. He stopped beside his boss and stared at him.



“Today, we’re going to strike back at—” Thomas cut himself off and turned to Agent Feinstein. He whispered, but the microphone still picked up his words. “Jim, what in the Sam Hill are you doing?”

Agent Feinstein shot him in the knee.

## 25 - One-Way Ticket

“Show me your hands!”

An officer crept toward the front of the Expedition. He drew a bead on Drew’s face.

We all held our hands up. Mine shook as I struggled to control my failing body. My vision had begun to tunnel again.

“Slowly get out and lay facedown! Now!”

Drew peered into the mirror. “They’ve got us boxed in. This is the end of the road, Ashley.”

I tried to push my way through the fog, needing to think of something, anything, to get us past the police. It didn’t work.

The cop stopped ten feet in front of the vehicle. “I won’t tell you again!”

“We’re getting out,” Drew hollered. He looked at Nami and then back at Sammy. “I’m sorry. We tried to keep you safe, but we won’t be able to protect you anymore.”

I wanted to hit my knee again to clear the fog. The look in the officer’s eyes kept me from doing it. Any sudden movement would probably get us filled with lead.

I kept my right hand in the air as I opened my door and slid to the street. My thighs shook as I stood there. I’d passed exhausted a few hours ago.

The roar of the crowd at the president’s speech filled the area. It ebbed and flowed as I heard Thomas’ muffled words coming from the courtyard to our right. A line of buildings blocked our view of the monument.

My faculties failed me, and I collapsed to the ground. Even the pain of falling on my knee couldn’t hinder the flood of emotions and thoughts coming from the massive audience. There were too many people for me to fight against anymore.

I curled up like a child and cradled my head. The shouts of the officers around me were muted and distant.

Drew got out of the SUV. “Someone is going to shoot—”

“Shut the fuck up and get down.”

Four more officers came up behind us, weapons drawn. I could feel their hatred for me roiling amidst the myriad of minds fighting for space inside my head. They wanted nothing more than to shoot me on the spot. They thought I was a cop killer.

The shooting started.

Little pops in the distance came rapid fire.

The crowd by the monument fell silent.

More shots rang out, and then all hell broke loose.

The officer in front of us paused. "What's going on?" he called over his shoulder.

The ground vibrated as people stampeded away from the monument. A few men led the charge, sprinting past the cop cars, screaming about a shooting. They didn't stop to explain.

The radio on the lead officer's shoulder bleated. *"Shots fired! Multiple officers down. Get units up here now! We need medical. Send everyone. The president has been shot!"*

"My God." The cop stood there, looking over the chaotic, onrushing crowd.

I struggled to lift my head and look at the madness rushing past us. If I hadn't fallen down on the opposite side of the Expedition, the crowd would have crushed me.

We were too late. Murdock had already taken President Thomas out. After everything we'd suffered through, we had failed.

More calls came through the radios.

"I'll take care of them," the cop yelled at the others. "Get over there and see what the fuck is going on! Rooney, you stay back here and help me cuff these bastards."

"I wouldn't go in there," I said.

"Shut up and stay down."

The officers plunged into the crowd, disappearing as they fought their way through the horde. The streets clogged as even more people filtered away from the shooting.

I caught clips of panic-stricken thoughts. There were so many, and they flitted through so quickly, that I couldn't get a grasp on what they'd seen.

What had Murdock done?

The officer in front of us approached Drew, ordering him to get on his stomach and put his arms behind his back. Another cop came up behind us and grabbed my wrist.

He wrenched it, sending a jolt into my wounded shoulder.

It gave me the moment of clarity I needed.

I rolled to my back and kicked up with my good leg. The heel of my shoe caught the officer on the chin.

He'd been too distracted by the people rushing past us to fully concentrate on me. His legs buckled from the blow, and he fell to his ass. A distant, glossy sheen flashed over his eyes as he looked at me.

His gun clattered on the street beside me.

"Stop right there!" The officer standing over Drew pointed his pistol at me. "One more move and I'll—"

Drew kicked him in the back of the knee.

The gun went off.

The bullet impacted the asphalt beside my cheek.

Drew grabbed the cop around the waist and pulled him down to the ground.

As I crawled toward them, my vision went hazy again. My breathing hitched as I struggled against the pressure weighing down on me.

Nami ran around the front of the SUV. Someone shoved her aside as they sprinted past her. "Watch it, fucker."

Sammy came up behind her, hand covering her mouth when she saw the unconscious officer beside me. She watched as Drew fought the other cop.

Drew landed a big punch that stunned the cop. He grabbed the gun and stood up. His chest rose and fell as he took heavy breaths.

"I'm sorry about this," he said. "But we have business to take care of."

He handcuffed both of the cops and leaned them against the side of the Expedition. I only saw vague images of the entire confrontation as I struggled to remain cognizant. When he finished with the officers, he hauled me to my feet, leaning me against him.

"You just assaulted a couple of cops. What's next?" Nami asked. "Want to go rob some lollipops from a couple of kids? Maybe we can throw a grandmother in front of traffic."

"Hilarious, Nora." I pointed down the street, in the opposite direction of the monument. "You guys need to run as far away from here as possible. Blend in with the crowd and disappear."

"Ash, don't go in there, please." Sammy stood in front of us, her eyes softening as she pleaded with me. "Let the police handle this. Come with us."

"Tits McGee is right," Nami said. "You can't even walk for Christ's sake. Is your boyfriend really going to carry you into another fight?"

A series of gunshots cracked.

"If we survive this, you and I are going to have a long talk about your attitude, Short Round," Drew said.

“Go!” I pointed down the street again. “If you stick around here and get hurt, you’re going to make everything we did today pointless.”

Sammy leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on my swollen cheek. “Please be careful.” She turned and gave Nami a gentle shove. “Let’s go.”

They started away from the vehicle, glancing over their shoulders one last time before they disappeared in the sea of people.

“Did you see that?” I asked. “She kissed me.”

“Yeah, yeah. It looked like a pity kiss from where I was standing.”

“No way, she digs my style.”

“*No one* digs your style. You look like a meth addict.”

Drew held the pistol in his left hand and dragged me along with his right. We hobbled into the crowd, shoving our way past desperate, fleeing people. The going was slow. My damaged leg moved like it had been filled with lead.

Screams of pain came from in front of us.

We stopped at the edge of the first courtyard. The monument loomed a few hundred yards away, lit up by a sea of large lights pointing at a stage.

“This is probably going to be a one-way ticket,” I said.

“Looks that way.”

“Want to see what kind of trouble we can stir up?”

“Hell yeah, I do.”

## 26 - Fun with Cars

Murdock grinned when Agent Feinstein shot another Secret Service agent as they climbed the handful of stairs leading to the platform. Feinstein put two rounds in his chest before shifting around and firing three more into the escaping crowd.

People fled in all directions, screaming and crying, begging and blubbering.

They were ants under a magnifying glass to Murdock. The helpless fools ran around him like chickens with their heads cut off. The sounds of approaching sirens only meant more kindling for the fire.

He stood in place, focusing all of his attention on the armed men by the stage.

A shot to the temple disabled one of the agents Murdock controlled. He moved onto another, forcing the president's detail to turn against their colleagues. Their numbers dwindled rapidly as they shot each other in quick succession.

Thomas pushed himself to a seated position behind the podium. His ruined knee was in front of him, leaking like a faucet. All the blood had drained from his face, making him look as if he'd aged ten years since he'd started his speech.

He applied pressure to his thigh, just above his knee, in an attempt to slow the blood loss. His eyes darted around the carnage before him. The men hired to protect his life at all costs had turned on each other.

The agent closest to Thomas had shot him in the leg.

The pain and torment and panic saturating his mind pleased Murdock even more than he could have imagined. He allowed President Thomas to stay in control of himself for now, wanting him to believe he still had a chance to escape.

Police officers pushed their way through the crowd, shouting unheard orders at one another. Officer Jones, the first to arrive, knelt by the stage and aimed at the nearest Secret Service agent.

"Freeze!"

Instead of complying, the agent swung his pistol toward the officer. Jones didn't hesitate, putting a bullet through the agent's left eye, sending him crashing from the stage. Leaping up beside the podium, Jones reached for the wounded POTUS.

He was shot down by two agents flanking from the left.

Another cop stumbled and fell into the grass by a line of lights. Exit wounds bled from his back. He twitched twice and was still. Three more officers arrived and returned fire, dropping one of the agents standing by the front of the stage.

Murdock released another mind as the body fell under a hail of bullets. He latched onto a cop running through the crowd. The man held a Remington pump-action shotgun.

He blasted two officers in the back before tilting the shotgun under his own chin. He painted the grass red.

One of the president's staffers ran toward his boss. Mascara streamed down her cheeks. Half of her white blouse was still tucked into her black skirt.

"Sir, are you—?"

A soupy redness blossomed in her shirt. She stumbled back and fell to a seated position in the middle of the stage. Her mouth worked as she looked around, eyes squinting in confusion.

A shot to the forehead snapped her neck back.

President Thomas cried out.

Murdock laughed. He reached for Thomas' mind.

*You shouldn't have left me to rot in that hellhole.*

Thomas flinched at the sound of the intrusive voice in his mind. *Murdock? But you're dead! You have to stop this! Please! You're killing good people!*

*You've killed them, Mr. President. You've killed them all.*

Murdock peered around the courtyard, searching for a new toy to wreak havoc with. He spotted the president's black limousine idling by the rear of the monument. He focused on the man sitting behind the wheel.

The engine revved as the driver pulled the transmission into gear.

Spewing sod from the wheels, the limousine lurched forward. It turned into the courtyard and accelerated around the monument. Cutting past the audio and video equipment setup by a series of tents, it drove straight for the panicked crowd.

People crunched under the grill, their limbs shattering, blood coating the hood and windshield. Mangled bodies ran under the tires. The limousine plowed on. The fenders dented and crumpled under the repeated blows against them.

Through the driver's eyes, Murdock spotted two cameramen standing amidst the crowd, snapping pictures of the anarchy. He forced the driver to press the gas

pedal to the floor and steer toward them.

One of the photographers turned toward the sound of the roaring engine just as the bumper met his legs.



## 27 - One of Those Days

Madness.

That was the only way to describe what we witnessed.

Cops shot each other.

A limousine drove through the crowd before it smashed into the side of a brick building. The driver didn't even try to steer away from it.

Bodies littered the courtyard and stage. Secret Service agents executed everyone who came close to them. They shot themselves and each other.

President Thomas crawled across the stage. One of his legs dragged behind him, a trail of red smearing in his wake. He looked nothing like the man of power I'd seen on television. He was small and fragile now, a man hurting and in need of help, like everyone else I could see.

I hadn't voted for the man, but I certainly felt for him as I watched his painful movements. He liked wars too much for my taste. It didn't seem like he was enjoying the one before him just then.

"Holy shit," Drew muttered. "Since when did Washington D.C. become Baghdad?"

"Since Murdock came to town. Let's go find the bastard and say hi."

Drew stepped onto the grass and dragged me along. Each movement sent a pang into my knee. That was the only thing that helped me fight off the fear emanating off those around us.

As we moved closer, I stopped again, taking my arm from Drew's shoulders. "I have to keep going by myself. You go around to the right and flank him."

"Can you walk?"

"I'll make do. When he figures out I'm here, I can't have anyone around who knows me. He'll use you against me just like he did at the police station."

"But how am I going to know who he is?"

That was a good question. I would have killed for just a few moments of peace to hatch out a plan. I'd been running around all day, without a chance to collect my thoughts. How many stupid decisions had I made in the past twenty-four hours? I'd lost count.

The boom of a shotgun came from somewhere nearby.

"I have a feeling that he isn't exactly hiding up there. Everyone is running around like their hair is on fire. Look for the guy who's just hanging out."

Drew gave me a nod and started across the lawn.

"Hey, Drew!"

"Yeah?" He spun around and looked back at me.

"She kissed me because I'm awesome. I know you're jealous."

He blinked twice. "What's the matter with you?"

"I have brain damage." I gave him a bloody grin.

"And you're an ass."

"That too. Keep your head down, Baldy." I took a few tentative steps, testing the strength of my knee. It held my weight, but running, or even power walking, was out of the question.

Drew jogged away, crouching low, and headed around the crowd on the other side of the courtyard. His head gleamed under the lights as he passed by them.

The sun had set, and darkness had begun its descent. The streetlights had already kicked on. They lit up the smoke hanging around the base of the monument from the gunfire.

Most of the crowd had fled the courtyard, lining the streets and sidewalks around it. A few stragglers ran past me, their eyes wild with fear. An old woman struggled to get off the grass. She had a cane, which I'd never seen a woman use before, and one hell of a limp.

She was moving as fast as her fragile body would allow, which was little more than a snail's pace.

I met her at the edge of the sidewalk. "Let me help you."

She recoiled from my hand when I extended it.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Cross my heart."

"What happened to you? You're covered in blood."

"It's been one of those days, you know?" I looped my arm under hers and helped her cross the sidewalk as best I could. I was so weak and injured that I wasn't sure who needed the assistance more.

"No, son, I don't think I know. The whole world seems to have gone mad today. People are shooting at the president, for fuck's sake."

Her vulgarity made me laugh in spite of the situation. There was something hilarious to me about old people swearing. I didn't know what that said about me, but whatever.

I got her over to a brick retaining wall that stood two feet high. Bushes and flowers bloomed behind it. I lowered her down to it so she could sit. "Do you mind if I borrow your cane? My knee isn't working so well."

“My hip isn’t working so well either. How am I supposed to get out of here without my goddamn cane?”

“Help will come soon.” I smiled at her. I liked this woman a lot. “But I need to get over there and stop the crazy shit that’s happening.”

“And how are you going to do that? They have guns.”

I flexed my triceps. “I brought my own.”

“Jesus... you’re a dead man.” She looked over my shirt. “Why are you dressed like a gigolo?”

“The ladies love it.” I lifted her cane from the sidewalk.

It was made of a heavy, knotted wood with a thick handle on the top. It was something I wouldn’t have expected an elderly woman to use.

“I’m a lady, and I sure don’t love it.” She gestured to the cane. “That was my husband’s, so don’t damage it or you’ll have to answer to me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Now stay here until more cops arrive.”

My ribs ached as I laughed again. She was hilarious.

I started across the lawn then, using the cane to move faster. I’d spent too much time helping that woman, and now I had to make it up. If Drew got too close to Murdock before I did, God only knows what would happen to him.

The gunfire had lessened, with shots coming every few seconds. It looked as if some of the remaining Secret Service agents were firing blindly into the people running away.

I’d made it fifty feet further when The Bridge formed in my mind.

The force of it nearly knocked me over. I leaned against the cane, my hand wobbling on the end of it. My chest hitched as I stood there, summoning what little will I had left.

Murdock scared the shit out of me.

The voices of those around me abated, shoved aside by the sheer force of Murdock’s power.

*Asher Benson.*

*That’s my name—don’t wear it out.*

*I’d hoped you would have learned your lesson by now. It’s a shame to have to kill you alongside these vermin.*

*How about we skip the part where you kill me and jump right into the part where you surrender? Otherwise, I’m going to have to come down there and whoop your ass.*

He didn’t respond, but his rage came through crystal clear.

I kept going, closing the distance quickly. Only a hundred yards remained until I got to the stage.

A man marched toward me, breaking out of the fray ahead. He held a shotgun in his hands. Blood covered his face and white polo shirt.

*Goodbye, Asher.*

He leveled the gun at me.

I dove behind a tree as the weapon belched fire.

Grass and dirt flew into the air by my feet.

I peeked around the tree at him.

Bark burst away by my face. The trunk splintered.

The man jerked the trigger again, but the shotgun didn't fire.

I came around the tree as fast as I could, hobbling toward the man. He was spitting distance away when I raised the cane by my side and held it like baseball bat. The last thing I wanted to do was brain the guy with it, so I swung at his side.

He moved to parry the blow with the shotgun, but he wasn't fast enough.

The knobby end of the cane caught him in the ribs. I heard the bones break.

When he doubled over, holding his side, I dropped the cane and looped my arm under his chin, locking in another guillotine. How many people was I going to choke out in one day? This was getting ridiculous.

Something slammed against my left shoulder. The pressure from the blow threw me off balance. My grip on the man evaporated, and he fell to the grass. I stumbled along for a few steps before my knee gave out, and I collapsed beside a bench.

My eyes rolled down so I could see what had hit me in the shoulder.

Blood soaked through my shirt.

Lots of blood.

I tried to work the joint, but it didn't respond. The pain came next—a white-hot poker stabbed into the muscle. Fiery agony swam into my arm. My fingers burned.

Tried to sit up.

Couldn't manage it.

A female cop stalked toward me, aiming a pistol at my face. The end of the barrel shook as she drew near. Her name tag read Shelley.

I looked up at her and licked my lips. I had cottonmouth in the worst way.

"I know that you aren't in control, and I don't blame you for what he's about to make you do."

One last, deep breath.

I waited for the end.

## 28 - Bad Aim

The cane cracked off the cop's skull.

She collapsed to the lawn in an awkward jumble of limbs.

Sammy stood behind her, holding the cane in both hands. Her ample chest rose and fell so quickly that I thought she might be hyperventilating. Her hair was matted to her forehead from sweat.

I'd never been so relieved and horrified at the same time.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. My voice came out raspy and dry.

"I just couldn't leave you out here in your condition." She knelt down beside me and looked at my shoulder. "Oh God, this looks bad."

"Sammy, you have to get out of here." I finally managed to sit up. "Run!"

"But what about—"

Her body went rigid. Her eyes locked onto mine, going wide in terror.

*You shouldn't have brought her here. Now I have to relieve her of duty.*

*She doesn't have anything to do with this. Leave her alone, you son of a bitch.*

Sammy stood and walked back to the unconscious police officer. She threw a hard kick into the cop's ribs before bending down and picking up the pistol. In rigid, fitful steps, she came back and stood over me, aiming at my chest.

I waited for the impact. It didn't come.

She remained where she was, a statue of boobs and sweaty beauty. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

Flashes of light bloomed behind her as cameras snapped thousands of pictures. I was lying in the middle of a modern battlefield, to be forever etched in the world's history.

Police officers and reporters lined the edges of the neighboring buildings, holding their ground. Any time a cop would attempt to move in, he would turn his gun on himself or his brothers.

They stopped trying to enter the courtyard. I could hear their shouts for us to surrender.

I hoped no one would take a shot at Sammy as she stood over me with the pistol.

My shoulder thrummed along as it leaked.

Cries of the wounded and the bereaved filled the air.

By the monument, a man stood, staring at the stage. He wore a sweatshirt and baseball cap. As I watched him, he turned and faced me. The brim of his hat hid his features in shadow.

Four members of Thomas' detail remained on the stage. They surrounded the wounded president, weapons drawn. Thomas moved his arms around in pleading motions, which they ignored.

The men bent down and each grabbed one of the president's limbs, hoisting him in the air. He howled as one of them raised him by his wounded knee. His scream echoed through the courtyard.

They marched down the nearest stairs and carried him toward us.

The man in the sweatshirt walked beside them. He moved with a pronounced limp.

*Why are you doing this?* I thought.

*Someone has to stop the cycle of insanity.*

*You're only making things worse. You're murdering innocent people.*

*A few eggs must be broken to make an omelet.*

Two cops sneaked across a sidewalk and stepped onto the grass. They moved quickly, knees bent, pistols held out front. When they got within fifty yards of Murdock and the president, they stopped abruptly.

Faced each other.

Raised their weapons.

Cries came from the watching crowd.

The men shot each other in the chest.

Thomas struggled against the agent's grip, unable to free himself.

They stopped ten feet away from me and threw their boss into the dirt. He cried out again when his wounded leg hit the ground.

Murdock stopped beside the agents and glared down at me.

"You've made today more difficult than it needed be."

I hocked a bloody wad of spit into the grass. "I've been told before that I'm a pain in the ass."

"Look what it's gotten you—I'm going to kill you and your little girlfriend here. None of this concerned you."

Thomas looked over at me. "Help us! Stop him!"

His fear made him irrational. Anyone with two eyes could see that I was out of the fight. All I could do at that point was bleed on the grass.

“What do you want me to do, use harsh language?”

Violent shakes shook Sammy’s entire body. I wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be all right.

But it wouldn’t.

Murdock pulled a black glove from his hand and held it up. One of the fingers was missing. He showed it to Thomas. “When you abandoned me in that hellhole, they did things to me that you can’t possibly imagine. I sacrificed everything for this country! *Everything!* And for what? To be abandoned by those I sought to protect? To be *shunned* by *them*?” He waved his arm at the crowds watching us.

“You start your wars and you spew your platitudes, but you don’t understand true loss. You speak of right and wrong, good and evil, as if you even understand what those words mean.” Murdock looked at one of the agents. “This man, Agent Feinstein, is considered a friend by you, no?”

Thomas held a hand up. “No. Murdock, listen to me. He has nothing to do with—”

Feinstein raised his pistol to his own temple and squeezed the trigger. His remains crumpled to the ground. The contents of his head oozed out.

“No!” Thomas gaped at the body of his friend.

I looked at Sammy, imagined her doing the same thing.

My stomach twisted in rage, and my pulse thundered in my ears. The flow of blood coming from my shoulder increased. I rolled to my stomach and tried to get up, but my body refused to cooperate. I didn’t have the strength to push myself away from the ground.

The other agents shoved the pistols under their chins, fingers caressing the triggers. Sammy did the same.

“Let’s get this over with,” Murdock said. “The world has changing to do, and that won’t start until they see your dead body, Mr. President.”

A small voice came from behind me. “Hey, Murdock.”

I looked over my shoulder. Nami stood just outside the group, aiming the Desert Eagle at Murdock.

“Fuck your mother.” She pulled the trigger.

The recoil from the enormous pistol knocked her over, and she landed on her ass. The gun flew from her grip and plopped into the grass almost a dozen feet away from me. It might as well have been in another state.

The bullet didn’t even come close.

Murdock smiled. “You almost ruined my fun.”

Nami stiffened. She stood and walked toward the Desert Eagle.

I watched helplessly from my spot in the dirt.

Another gunshot rang out.

Murdock staggered two steps forward, a grunt escaping him. A crimson splotch spread across the front of his sweatshirt. The baseball cap fell from his head.

“What?” he whispered.

He fell to his hands and knees. Spittle fell from his lips.

Everyone’s muscles went lax, their shoulders slumping as they regained control of their bodies. Sammy collapsed to the ground, weeping. She looked at the pistol in her hand with abject horror. She tossed it away as if it could bite.

Nami sat down beside her. A shiver ran through her body as she looked over at Murdock. “That was fucked up.”

The agents regained their composure and focused their attention on President Thomas. They formed a protective circle around him and searched the area for more threats.

Murdock’s arms gave out, and he dropped face first into the lawn.

The Bridge between our minds evaporated. I let out a long sigh of relief. It was a great feeling not having him swimming around in my head. The crowds surrounding us were outside of my telepathic range, so their voices didn’t flood in right away.

It was a rare moment of peace in a day straight out of hell. Peaceful as long as I didn’t count the horrible pain I was in, anyway.

Drew jogged up from the opposite side of the courtyard, pistol trained at Murdock’s back. “Not so tough now, are ya?”

“Where the hell have you been?” I wanted to jump up and slap the bald from his head. I had to settle with lying in the grass and bleeding on myself.

Drew sidestepped around Murdock, keeping his attention on the motionless body. “Sorry, I ran into a little trouble over there. A few people tried to detain me when they saw my pistol. I had to persuade them otherwise.”

“Freeze!” The agent’s swung their weapons around and aimed at Drew.

He stopped in midstride. “Relax, I just shot the guy who was—”

“On the ground, now!”

Drew complied, though he grumbled as he lowered himself down. His blood-soaked visage made it look like he’d slaughtered someone.

Helicopter rotors whooped in the distance.

Sirens blared incessantly.

Officers took tentative steps toward us.

The roar of the helicopter grew. I looked toward the White House and watched as a UH-60 flew toward us. I tried to remember the name of the president’s helicopter, but my memory was hazy from blood loss. Marine One?



Thomas was getting a flight out of there. I hoped at some point that someone would get me one too before I bled out.

It slowed as it approached, the rear end dipping.

The agents continued yelling at Drew, but I couldn't hear what they were saying anymore. One of them attended to Thomas' knee. The pain-ridden expression on his face told me that he wasn't enjoying it.

Wind whipped against my face, stinging my eyes.

When the chopper was less than twenty feet above the ground, it stopped descending and held steady in the air for a moment.

One of the agents waved for it to land.

It didn't.

The Bridge reformed in my mind.

Tendrils of panic gripped me as I screamed for one of the agents to shoot Murdock again. They couldn't hear me over the deafening sound of the helicopter.

The engine whined as it gained altitude. It banked hard right, accelerating rapidly.

All of us watched as it flew over the stage and crashed into the Washington Monument.

## 29 - Mayhem

Chunks of the rotor spun away, embedding themselves in the ground around the monument.

The tail end of the chopper, dislodged during the impact, fell on the electrical equipment used to broadcast President Thomas' speech. Sparks showered the area. The lights went out a second later, plunging the stage into darkness.

The husk of the helicopter tumbled down the length of the monument, flames and smoke trailing behind it. Metal screeched as it scraped along the stone.

It destroyed the stage on impact.

Strobes of light came from the streets as people took pictures of the mayhem.

"Shoot him!" I screamed again. "Murdock isn't—"

The agent attending to Thomas' knee starched.

"Murdock isn't what?" the president asked.

The agent didn't respond.

No one else did either.

Murdock rolled to his back and sat up. His face was a mask of misery. His breaths came out as gurgles. Blood soaked through his shirt and began pooling in his lap.

"Murdock isn't dead yet," he wheezed.

I looked at the Desert Eagle, which was ten feet away.

It was so far.

I crawled toward it, each movement punishing my shoulder and knee. My left arm refused to cooperate, so I used the right to pull me along.

The agents positioned their guns under their chins again. Sammy lifted the pistol between her legs and pointed it at Nami's forehead. Drew aimed his at the president.

My fury returned at the sight of it.

The pistol was still eight feet beyond my reach.

Murdock stayed in a seated position. He gave Thomas a bloody, weary grin.

"I will not be robbed of my revenge."

*Smith wanted you to do this, I thought. He used both of us.*

I wasn't sure about anything related to Smith, except for that. He'd played everyone from the beginning, and right then, from somewhere safe, I knew he was watching all of us kill each other.

Six feet away.

*How do you know that?* Murdock thought.

*He's not here for the endgame is he? Why would he have asked me to help find you, but then let you get away?*

*He didn't. I killed his men and escaped.*

Five feet.

*You only took out a handful of his flunkies—where were the rest?*

Murdock didn't respond. His marionettes held fast.

Four.

*Where do you think you're going? Do you truly believe that I'll let you get to that gun before I complete my mission?*

I stopped crawling and reached for the pistol. It was still three feet from my fingertips.

Murdock watched me. A stream of blood spilled between his lips and dripped from his chin. "Watch as I make history."

"You're so full of shit. All the mumbo jumbo you keep spewing is pure bullshit. If you cared about justice, you wouldn't be slaughtering innocents."

"Justice? You think this has to do with *justice*? All I seek is *vengeance*. Look at what you fight for! Look at what they did to me!"

Images of the desert flooded my mind. A cell. Knife. Severed finger. Hammer. Blood. So much blood. A chair of red-hot iron. A man named Alan Richards. A man who would become Murdock. And more. So much more.

The torrent of emotions and memories dropped away as suddenly as they'd come. I gasped, sucking in air, and fought to keep myself from passing out. I'd relived all Murdock's torment and torture in a span of five seconds.

No one could have suffered what he had and maintained their sanity.

I understood his hate.

He deserved revenge.

And I had to deprive him of it.

*I'm sorry, I thought.*

*Keep your sorry. I'm taking what's owed me.*

Drew thumbed back the hammer on his pistol. I could see his cheeks quivering as he fought against the control.

Murdock still held my gaze. "When the bow breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come America, cradle and all."

My fury boiled over. I saw red. Tasted blood. I reached for the gun again, though I hadn't moved any closer to it. All of my anger, despair, and disgust focused on the handle.

It vibrated in the grass.

"What?" Murdock gaped at the gun. "That's impossible."

The pistol slid across the ground, landing in my palm.

Before I could think about what had happened, I swung it around and aimed between Murdock's eyes. "Pop goes the weasel, asshole."

The enormous recoil sprained my wrist as it bucked.

The top part of Murdock's head disappeared in a red mist.

His nearly decapitated body fell backward.

Everyone around me slumped again as death spasms rocked Murdock's limbs.

The Bridge disintegrated.

Sammy and Nami ran over to me.

"Did you just use the force?" Nami asked. "Holy fuck balls."

I tried to reply, but couldn't form the words. I was fading fast.

Sammy tenderly touched my face and leaned over me. Her lips moved, though I couldn't hear what she said. I willed her to kiss me again.

It didn't work.

The Secret Service agents yelled at Drew. He dropped his gun and ran over to me. His hands pressed against my shoulder. He shouted back at the agents. They ignored him.

The pain that should have come from the pressure on my shoulder didn't hit me. I knew I was in deep trouble then. My body was unresponsive.

Eyes went out of focus. Sounds had a tinny quality.

I focused on speaking one last time.

"Hooah."

I slipped away.

## 30 - The More Things Change

The hospital food sucked ass.

I'd often wondered if they fed that shit to people so they would want to get discharged as soon as possible. If that was the intent, then it was definitely working on me. I would do a cartwheel out of the front door as soon as possible.

It might not have been as bad if my nurse was at least moderately attractive. But no, I had a woman in her sixties named Agnes taking care of me. And for some unknown reason, she enjoyed feeding me pudding. My right arm worked OK, except for the sprained wrist, so I really could have handled that myself.

She just loved shoveling that stuff into my mouth. Couldn't say that I blamed her.

I was awesome.

My injuries, however, were not.

My face looked like I boxed ten rounds with Mike Tyson.

The bullet went clean through my shoulder, so they just had to fix me up—no surgery required. I'd have a nice scar from it, but chicks dig scars.

So I've been told. That better be true.

The damage to my knee wasn't as bad as it had seemed. Partial PCL tear. Strained ACL and MCL. I told that dude he kicked like a sissy. I wondered how his nap in the elevator was. Uncomfortable, hopefully.

The biggest complaint I had was that they wouldn't let me leave the hospital. That and they kept me drugged twenty-four hours a day. Whenever men in suits came to talk to me, they doubled the dosage. They overdid it sometimes, and the government goons couldn't get straight answers out of me.

I'd been hammered with questions for a solid week now.

I'd been given no answers.

Pissed me off.

Through their utter confusion at my participation in the events that day, I figured a few things out for myself.

First, they had no idea who I was. That told me that either Smith wasn't working for the government, or he wasn't telling anyone what had been going

on. A rogue, if you will.

Second, they had confused looks on their faces when I asked if they'd arrested the guy in the hotel. The Man in Black had escaped before the police had arrived. That didn't give me a warm and fuzzy feeling about being stuck in a hospital. I couldn't handle another fight with him.

Third, I still didn't trust guys who wore suits.

The bastards wouldn't even tell me if I was going to be charged with any crimes. The fact that I was handcuffed to the bed didn't give me a lot of hope that they'd let me walk out of there a free man.

They did let me watch TV though, thank God.

My name was all over the news. Pictures of me popped up every two minutes.

Great.

All I needed to deal with was a bunch of paparazzi douche bags.

Fortunately, my ability hadn't been brought up from what I could tell. A bunch of videos from cameras and cell phones had captured me blowing Murdock's face off, but none of them had an angle of me getting the gun. That was a minor miracle.

The blowback from that would have been catastrophic.

So far, the official story was that terrorists had spent years infiltrating the key members of the U.S. government. They then used a combination of drugs and mind control to manipulate people. That was how they got Secret Service agents and cops to kill each other.

It was a ludicrous story that I couldn't believe people actually thought was true.

Then again, who would have believed the truth?

I peered over at the remote sitting on the stand beside my bed. All week, I'd been trying to get the damn thing to fly into my hand like the gun had. That was *the dream* for all guys—not having to get up to retrieve something.

How many beers could I make fly from the fridge to my spot on the couch?

Nirvana.

No matter how hard I concentrated, I couldn't get the remote to budge even a millimeter. Whatever magic I performed that night, I just wasn't able to replicate it again. That didn't stop me from trying.

I hadn't seen anyone I knew since they brought me here, so when Drew walked through the door, I couldn't help but laugh when I saw his ever-present suit.

"What?" he asked. "I got a booger hanging?"

"You're wearing a suit. I don't trust people in suits."

“I always wear a suit.”

“That should tell you something.”

He walked across the room and looked at the IV bag hanging by the bed. “Sorry to see that being locked up in a hospital hasn’t knocked that piss-poor sarcasm out of your system.”

I went to raise my left hand to crack him on the shoulder, but the movement hurt.

Drew saw me wince. “Moron.”

“Shut up. So they aren’t keeping you locked up too?”

“Nope.” He sat down in a plastic chair beside my bed. “They’ve been debriefing the hell out of me though. Today was my first day back at work.”

“What about all the shit we went through at the police station? They’re letting you back on the force after we had that shoot out?”

“The president gave me a full pardon for the ‘crimes’ we committed in the process of saving his life.” He used air quotes when he said crimes. He leaned back and put his feet up on my bed. “They also offered to give me a few months of paid leave, but I couldn’t stay away from the job that long.”

“Lucky bastard.” I waved my good arm around at the furnishings of my hospital room. “You can see the luxury I’m living in.”

“They know that I was the *real* hero last week, that’s why. This place is a lot nicer than that dump you call home, anyway. They haven’t told you what their plans are for you yet?”

“Not a peep.”

Drew rubbed his freshly shaved head. “That doesn’t sound so good. They did tell me that I could finally visit you today, so that’s something. They can’t plan to lock you away if they’re letting us talk, right?”

I shrugged. “These people are idiots—who knows what they’re thinking. Have you talked to Sammy?”

“No. I called her a few times, but she won’t answer. Sorry, Ashley.”

“I guess I can’t really blame her. Why would she ever want to see us again? All I did was screw up her life.” Though I wore my tough-guy face, I was pretty disappointed that she didn’t even want to talk. It made sense, but it still sucked. “What about that little shit, Nami?”

“She’s soaking up all the benefits they’re throwing her way. Paid leave, a new, higher-paying position, and a bonus for her troubles. Have you seen her giving interviews on CNN yet?”

I had. It was some of the most hilarious television I’d ever seen. The first live interview she’d done was cut short because she kept saying ‘fuck’. All the

subsequent interviews were cut up and bleeped to hell. They were closer to SNL skits than actual interviews.

The girl was a firecracker.

We laughed about all the crazy stuff she'd said for a few minutes before I finally caved in and asked about Melissa.

"She's gotta hate me more than ever."

Drew held his hands up and tilted his head to the side. "C'est la vie, Ashley. You did almost get me killed about fifty times."

"Yeah, but now you're a national hero."

"Ash, I'm pretty sure that you could save her from a burning building, and she would still hate your guts."

"I'm so glad the two of you are still together."

"She's better than your nonexistent girlfriend."

"Ouch."

We swapped stories about our interrogations and the fallout of that day. Drew didn't know anything about what had happened with Smith either. They stayed tightlipped about it whenever he asked.

The country was in turmoil. People didn't trust each other. Scammy companies were coming out of the woodwork with fake tests for the 'mind-control drugs' that didn't actually exist.

Gun sales were through the roof.

Chicken hawks were calling for a new war, even though they didn't know who had attacked them yet.

And that fallout was just beginning.

Three men, all wearing grey suits, stepped through the door. More feds. Great.

The lead man stopped a few feet from the bed. "Lieutenant, I've been ordered to—"

"Why do all of you still call me that? I haven't been in the army for half a damn decade."

He stared at me for several seconds before continuing. "*Mr. Benson*, I've been ordered to hand you this. A call will come through shortly." He gave me an iPad.

"A call on an iPad?"

Drew snickered. "The future is here, Ashley. It's probably a video chat."

"Oh." I wasn't the most technologically advanced guy. My limited budget didn't allow for much food, let alone high-priced gadgets.

One of the men pointed at Drew. "He needs to leave. This is for your eyes only."



“Hmm.” I tapped my index finger on my lips. “How about you kiss my ass?” Drew chuckled. He kept his feet on the bed and didn’t give any indication that he was going to leave.

The government stooges exchanged a glance. The one in front said, “But—” “Did I stutter? He’s not going anywhere. He knows everything that I do. Take a hike.”

The men grumbled for a few seconds before leaving and closing the door behind them.

I said, “Goddamn, I hate the government.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

The iPad shook in my hands. “It’s vibrating like one of those sex toys Melissa uses on you.” I handed it to Drew. “How do I make it stop?”

He grabbed it from me, refusing to make eye contact. “Goddamn mind reader always knowing my business.”

After making a few swipes with his finger, President Thomas’ face filled most of the screen.

“Mr. Lloyd? I was expecting to speak to Mr. Benson.”

“He’s right here, sir.” Drew handed it back to me and grimaced. He mouthed ‘whoops’ as I took the iPad back.

It was a little surreal to have a video chat with the President of the United States. On an iPad. In a hospital.

I held the tablet out in front of me. “Hello, sir.” I hated calling people ‘sir’, but this was the president after all.

“Mr. Benson, you’re looking better than the last time I saw you.”

“Well, I’m not dead, so there’s that.”

“I was warned that you had a bit of a smart mouth.”

“Yes, sir.”

Thomas cleared his throat. “I don’t have much time, so I’ll be brief. You might as well angle that around so Mr. Lloyd can see me. I wanted this to be one on one, but I suppose exceptions can be made for the two of you.”

I shifted in the bed, doing my best to ignore the ache in my shoulder. Drew leaned over and peered into the screen.

Thomas said, “I owe you my life. I apologize for not thanking you in person, but my team feels that getting in close proximity to someone who can learn national security secrets within a few seconds wouldn’t be too intelligent. I tend to agree with them, unfortunately. The country owes you a debt greater than they’ll ever know. Obviously, we haven’t, and we *won’t*, release all of the details of what took place that day. The world isn’t ready for that kind of knowledge.”

Maybe he was right about that, but I hated the idea of someone telling six billion people what was good for them. It took an incredible amount of arrogance to even think something like that. It was their secret government agency, The Psych Ward, or whatever in the hell it was called, that had caused the problem in the first place.

Thomas continued, "I'm going to be honest with you now, Mr. Benson. We've had a lot of discussions about what to do with you. Your friends have all been released from custody on the condition that they take an oath of silence. That's a harder proposition to offer you. Knowing what you can do, it's difficult for some of my staff to cope with the idea of you walking freely in the streets. They fear you'll do something damaging to our intelligence agencies or that your talents will be purchased by the highest bidder and used in corporate espionage."

"Sir, you don't need to worry about that," I said. "I'm guessing that my apartment has been torn apart by your men by now. Have you seen the pictures? Do you know how I live?"

"I have and that's been one of the best arguments for your release. If you wanted to damage us, or anyone else, you would have done so by now. That's why I've ordered your full pardon as well, but with a few caveats."

Oh, great. Now I would owe favors to the man whose life I saved. That was a little back asswards to me, but I wasn't in a position to negotiate.

"As you know, all the parties involved in these tragedies haven't been brought to justice yet. When we have a lead on their whereabouts, we might need your assistance during interrogations."

"You're talking about Smith?"

"Among others."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"A traitor and a coward."

"No sh... uhh... no kidding." I wanted to swat myself in the forehead. "He told me that he ran something called The Psych Ward and that he had eight telepaths working under him. He said they needed me because their operatives were overseas. Was any of that true?"

Thomas paused and looked to someone behind the camera. He nodded at whatever they said before turning his attention back to us. "I can't tell you everything, of course, but I owe you a few answers. Yes, he ran a small counterterrorism agency, and it was known as The Psych Ward. I hated that name. We learned several months ago that he wasn't just playing for our team. I ordered his termination."

Drew whistled. "He didn't take that well."

Thomas looked over the camera again. "Remember who is in charge," he said to the person behind it. "No, Mr. Lloyd, he did not. We screwed up, to be honest. Smith used his telepaths to infiltrate several of our intelligence agencies. He's poached many of our resources and killed a lot of good men. We aren't even sure how many moles he has in our midst. Everyone is a suspect right now. He poses a danger that I can't even articulate."

"Are there really eight other telepaths operating out there?" I asked.

"I can't confirm or deny that. And with that, I must be going. We'll be in touch, Mr. Benson."

"Sir, I have two more questions. I went through a lot last week without even knowing why."

Thomas ran his finger over his lips. "You can ask them, but I might not answer."

"Why did you give that speech if you knew Murdock was still out there?"

"We had video evidence that Murdock had died during his attack on the police station. He fooled some of my best. They've joined the unemployment line."

I didn't understand what evidence that could have been, but at least it made me think that President Thomas wasn't a *complete* moron. A partial moron, maybe, but not a complete one.

"Last question, Mr. Benson. I have meetings set up from now until the end of time." Thomas looked at his watch and grimaced.

"How did Smith know that Murdock was going after you at the monument? They couldn't even locate him without my help, so I don't understand how they were able to anticipate his movements after that."

"During the autopsy on Murdock's body, they found a small tracking device attached to his shoe. We believe it was attached during the battle at the cemetery." Thomas signaled to someone behind the camera. "Thanks again for your service, gentlemen. We'll be in touch."

The video feed cut off. I dropped the iPad into my lap.

I thought I had enough pieces to put the majority of the puzzle together. Smith used me to locate Murdock and then tracked him up until the attempted assassination at the monument. After I did my part to find Murdock, Smith wanted to kill me and everyone else who might have known about my involvement.

Smith was still out there in the wild. He had access to men, weapons, and information.

And I'd screwed up his plans.

The government was going to release me, but the odds were high that my apartment would be bugged and that I'd have a tail following me everywhere I went. They already told me that I would have to help them again in the future.

All of that had happened to me because I walked into that damned bank.

Drew gave me a thumbs-up. "They're going to release you."

I eased back into the bed, letting my head settle against the pillow. "But how long is my leash going to be?"

I stared at my hands.

\*\*\*\*\*

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## GET THE DARK FREE



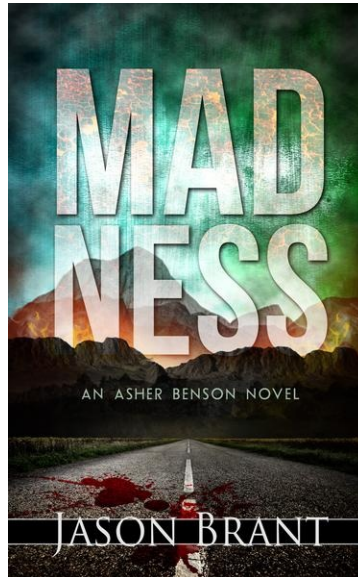
Christy Barnett is sleeping when her aging German shepherd Molly growls into the darkness outside her bedroom. She wakes to a dim glow provided by her Kindle's screen, thankful that she had fallen asleep while reading again. The power has gone out, the world outside her window is eerily dark and silent. And Molly is wary of something that waits in the hallway, hiding in the shadows.

A dark cloud has fallen over the city of Aberdeen, MD. The population disappears in an instant. For the handful of survivors, those lucky enough to have a light source not connected to the power grid, it's more than terrifying. They're left alone, walking through a nightmare, and that is a fate that could be worse than death itself.

*The darkness is alive and it is the reason we fear the night.*



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## About the Author

"JASON BRANT" is an anagram for Bas Trojann, a former Bigfoot hunter who, after being abducted (and subsequently returned) by aliens, decided to hang up his ghillie suit and enter the world of professional arm wrestling. Despite back-to-back first place finishes in the South Dakota World Championship League, Bas receded from athletics to invent cheese and give Al Gore the initiative to create the internet.

Nearly a decade after writing the bestselling self-help series, Tomato Soup and Grilled Cheese (Cut into Four Pieces) for the Soul, Bas has left his life of notoriety and critical acclaim behind him to write existential, erotic poetry.

His wife washes their clothing on his abs.

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